

**July 11, 2026--The Centennial Anniversary of the small
Sunday school that would become Sharon Mennonite Church**

On Saturday, July 11, 2026, our church family will pass a significant milestone in its history—the 100th anniversary of the small rural Sunday school that in just six and a half years became a congregation—Sharon Mennonite Church of Plain City, Ohio. While Sunday school and church might seem to us like two peas in a pod, such has not always been the case. There was a time when we were a Sunday school but not a church. To understand how this could be, let's first think about the institution of Sunday school itself.

Sunday school as a protestant Christian activity for religious instruction, and sometimes general education, did not exist until the year 1780. At that time, poor urban children in England did not attend public school, but rather they toiled six days a week in dangerous industrial factories. Juvenile delinquency was rampant among such children and intervention was urgently needed. Robert Raikes, a newspaper editor in the city of Gloucester, was inspired to establish a recurring school that would meet each Sunday to provide underprivileged children instruction in morality and basic literacy. His efforts were an immediate success and Englishmen soon established other similar Sunday schools. By 1785, about 250,000 English children were attending Sunday schools across the country.

On Sunday, September 15, 1799, the first U.S. Sunday school convened in Pawtucket, Rhode Island. It was organized by Samuel Slater who wanted to provide fundamental literacy and moral education to the poor children who labored in his textile factory. That first U.S. Sunday school class consisted of seven boys. Shortly thereafter, Slater transferred operation of his Sunday school to the First Baptist Church of Pawtucket, and the focus of the school naturally transitioned solely to biblical instruction.

By the late 1800s, Sunday schools had become common throughout the U.S., and they were the primary means by which protestant groups conducted evangelism and outreach activities. American Anabaptist groups, consistent with their faith tradition, were more reluctant to participate in this "English-conceived" Sunday-school movement.

Several Anabaptist-history sources report that the first Anabaptist Sunday school in America was not organized until 1863, when an Amish group formed a Sunday school in Adams County, Indiana. Other reliable sources, however, indicate that two Anabaptist communities (one Amish and the other Mennonite) in Pennsylvania each organized Sunday schools prior to 1863.

Those accounts notwithstanding, John Umble, the principal authority on the history of Amish and Mennonite Sunday schools in Ohio, stated that in 1859, a group of Amish laymen organized and operated a Sunday school in Holmes County using the Gerber Valley schoolhouse as a meeting place. Their Sunday school met on Sunday afternoons and operated only from spring to fall as dirt roads of the county were nearly impassable during the winter. The primary motivation for establishing the Gerber Valley Sunday school was to create an Amish alternative to local protestant Sunday schools that had begun to recruit participation of the community's Amish children. The mission of the Gerber Valley Sunday school was to: 1) provide biblical instruction, 2) teach the foundations of Christian morality, and 3) warn Amish youth about unspecified evil influences present in Holmes County.

The first central-Ohio Anabaptist Sunday school was organized in 1863, and it was conducted in a meetinghouse near West Liberty in Logan County. This Sunday school was organized by David Plank, a local minister who was especially interested in teaching youngsters about the Bible. Inspired by the success of Plank's Sunday school, a second Sunday school was organized by the nearby Oak Grove congregation in the spring of 1864.

The motivation for establishment of these two Logan County Sunday schools was that traditional Amish church services were increasingly perceived as being insufficient in capturing the attention and participation of many Amish youngsters. Chanted hymns sung from *The Ausbund*, though beautiful and transcendent to adult ears, did not gather much participation from Amish youngsters. By the end of customarily lengthy Amish church services, adolescent boys seated on back-row benches often began to fidget and snicker, which in turn caused the girls sitting across from the boys to giggle. Rebukes from the pulpit were commonplace and sometimes an adult would get up from his/her bench and sit among the rowdy youngsters to quiet them. In general, the church did not provide young people any formal instruction until they were old enough to participate in the six-month series of instruction classes that were required prior to baptism and becoming a member of the church. The organization of Sunday schools seemed to offer an effective additional means by which to involve Amish youngsters in spiritual activities, and by the late 1800s Sunday school became increasingly increasingly common in Anabaptist congregations.

The latter half of the 19th century was a turbulent time for the Amish of Logan and Champaign counties. Initially, the Amish in the two counties functioned as a single entity under the oversight of one bishop. By the 1890s, however, the unity of the community began to splinter as some members sought to conduct services in English as did the Mennonites, while others steadfastly insisted that worship be conducted according to tradition in German. Consequently, an Anabaptist community that initially had been uniformly old order Amish evolved into a community composed of Amish, Amish Mennonite, Beachy

Amish, and Mennonite congregations. The value of Sunday school, however, was a core belief shared by all and Sunday-school programs gradually expanded to include instruction for adults as well as youngsters and youth.

By the turn of the 20th century, the Anabaptist congregations of northern Champaign and southern Logan counties were thriving and some routinely sent out mission workers to establish singing schools and Sunday schools in underserved areas of Ohio and other states. About the same time, Madison County's old order Amish community began to experience a desire among a few families to conduct their spiritual and vocational lives in a manner that was less austere.

At least in part, this desire for change was stimulated by an industrial revolution that was rapidly replacing the horse as primary power source for family transportation and operation of agricultural implements. In 1917, Henry Ford began production of the Fordson Model F farm tractor. Like the horse, the Fordson could pull the farmer's plow, disk, planter, drill, cultivator, cycle mower, binder, reaper, buck rake, hay loader, manure spreader, and flat-bed and box-bed wagons. But unlike a horse, the Fordson needed no daily ration of oats, hay, water, and bedding. The Fordson only needed a few gallons of cheap, low-octane fuel to do its work, and also unlike a horse, the Fordson only needed to be "fed" when it was actively being used. Similarly, by 1917 Henry Ford's inexpensive Model T Ford car was well on its way to replacing horse-drawn buggies as the dominant means of transportation for rural families. Prior to the automobile, travelling more than a few miles from home was a challenge for country folks. With an automobile, rural families began to make more frequent trips to town for supplies and entertainment. They even began to travel still further from home on lengthy weekend get-aways and out-of-state trips to visit relatives, participate in funerals, weddings, etc. The economic and many other advantages offered by gasoline-powered tractors and automobiles appealed to some Amish folks for whom such machines were not allowed by church rules.

While the desire to incorporate modern conveniences into their lives undoubtedly, appealed to some Madison County Amish, there also at this time was a growing desire among some members of the Amish community to increase their understanding of the Bible and to more fully appreciate the comfort, reassurance, and hope that one gains by reading and meditating on Biblical passages. While many Amish homes would have had Martin Luther's German translation of the Bible. The high-German language in which these Bibles are written was not easily read even by people whose first language was Pennsylvania Dutch. Reading and hearing scripture read in English appealed to some Amish who day-by-day were increasingly finding themselves living in an English world.

On April 6, 1917, the U.S. declared war on Germany and thereby officially entered the First World War. The declaration was in response to sinking of U.S. ships by German U-boats (submarines). It was about this same time that a few Madison County Amish re-located to Champaign County and affiliated themselves with the Oak Grove congregation. The boys and young men of this group pursued work as farm hands, day laborers and shop workers, while the girls and young women were hired to provide domestic services. Other ready-for-change Madison County Amish, opted to remain in Madison County but travel to Champaign County on Sundays to participate in Oak Grove's Sunday school and church services. Travelling from Plain City to West Liberty, a distance of nearly 30 miles, was always a risky undertaking. The roads were mostly unimproved, deeply rutted wagon paths, and the vehicles driven on those roads were mostly non-enclosed, cold, breakdown-prone Model T Fords. After enduring these trying weekly commutes for nearly a decade, something had to be done; there had to be a better way to obtain weekly worship services. To that end, a small group of Plain City area believers asked the Sunday-school workers at the Oak Grove church to consider conducting a mission Sunday School in northern Madison County. Their request was favorably received by the Oak Grove congregation and arrangements were soon made to conduct a weekly Sunday-afternoon Sunday school in the Lombard schoolhouse, which then existed about 5 miles west of Plain City on the north side of the intersection of Rosedale-Plain City and Lombard-Chuckery roads.



Lombard School, which at one time stood on the north side of the intersection of Lombard-Chuckery and Rosedale-Plain City roads, and which for a couple months in the summer of 1926 served as the location for the mission Sunday-school that grew to become Sharon Mennonite Church. The first Sunday-school session was held here on Sunday, July 11, 1926. The schoolhouse, located about 5 miles west of Plain City, was demolished many decades ago and the site is now occupied by a private residence.

On Sunday, July 11, 1926, the first Mennonite Sunday school in Madison County was conducted at the Lombard schoolhouse. This white, wood-framed schoolhouse was typical of the hundreds of one-room schools that served rural communities across Ohio from the late 1800s to mid-1950s, at which time small township school districts were consolidated into regional districts that typically were served by a high school and an elementary school.

Participants in the new mission Sunday school were determined to succeed and to prove themselves worthy of the time and effort expended on their behalf by the Oak Grove mission workers. As part of their first Sunday-school session on July 11, 1926, they elected Abner Miller to serve as their superintendent, and Jonas Troyer to serve as secretary-treasurer. Abner Miller was the father the late Henry Miller and a brother of the late Roman Miller—both of whom were lifelong, dedicated members of Sharon.

Sunday-school sessions were conducted every Sunday afternoon with the exception of Sundays when attendees went to Oak Grove for communion or to participate in counsel meetings. Sunday-sessions were conducted in the Lombard Schoolhouse for only a couple months, at which time attendees pursued other possibilities for a meeting place. A small, abandoned church in Resaca was soon identified as being available and arrangements were quickly made for re-location of the Sunday school to Resaca.



The abandoned church in Resaca where the mission Sunday school that later became Sharon Mennonite Church was held from late August 1926 until the end of 1937. At some point in time following Sharon's departure, the building reportedly was converted into a hog house, and later still was demolished. The old Coleman® lantern and kerosene lamp on display in Sharon's history cabinet were each used to provide light for services conducted in this building.

John Umble's history of Ohio Mennonite Sunday Schools indicates the first meeting of the young Sunday school at its Resaca location was held August 26, 1926. As that date fell on a Thursday rather than a Sunday, it seems conceivable that Sunday school members might have conducted a mid-week meeting on site to determine how the no longer active church house might be made suitable as a meeting place. The late Mary Nissley, an original member of the Sunday school, informed this writer that the Resaca church house had few redeeming qualities after many years of disuse and neglect. Minimal heating and very poor interior lighting were just two of many deprivations Sunday-school attendees endured when meeting at Resaca.

In late 1926, the Ohio Mission Board appointed William A. Miller to nurture the spiritual growth of the fledgling Sunday school Resaca. Miller was a highly dedicated, motivated mission worker and, in addition to directing the Sunday school, led the group in organizing midweek Bible/prayer meetings, Young People's Meetings, and singing-school classes. Bible knowledge and the ability to read hymns scored with shaped notes improved quickly and remarkably thanks to Miller's diligent efforts.

On Sunday, January 1, 1928, the small Sunday school at Resaca re-organized via the election of new officers—Abram Kauffman as superintendent, Abner Miller as secretary-treasurer, Erwin Kauffman as program director for the Young People's Meeting program, and two choristers—Ida Yutzy and Mary Kramer. The size of the Sunday school grew from about 18 in the beginning to as-many-as 35 by 1928. William A. Miller's energy was an inspiration to attendees, and led the small group to sponsor its first in a series of annual Bible Conferences. The first such conference was convened during Thanksgiving week of 1928, and was led by Bishop Eli L. Frey of Wauseon, Ohio.

Abram Kauffman was re-elected as Sunday school superintendent in 1929 and again in 1930, during which year the Sunday school conducted its first baptismal service—an event conducted under the direction of Bishop Samuel E. Allgyer of West Liberty. By 1930, the group had grown in size to an extent that weekly meetings typically had 55 to 65 attendees. Many of the attendees, mostly originating from Plain City's old order Amish community, had by this time transferred their church memberships to Oak Grove, the sponsor of the Sunday school at Resaca.

By the end of 1932, this growing Sunday school had conducted its fifth annual Bible Conference, a highly successful event featuring John L. Stauffer of Harrisonburg, Virginia, as its instructor. The amazing strides made by this small Sunday school in just 6 years created a sense of urgency among the group to: 1) establish a permanent meeting place of their own, 2) establish themselves formally as an independent entity, and 3) ordain a minister to serve them.

While it would require another five years to realize the goal of establishing a permanent meeting house of their own. Progress was rapidly made in achieving the other goals. On January 15, 1933, forty-five Sunday-school members took formal action to establish themselves as an independent congregation, and to dissolve their status as a mission Sunday school operating under the oversight of the Oak Grove church. That same day, Abram Kaufman was selected by lot to serve as pastor of the new congregation. An ordination service was conducted that same day by Samuel E. Allgyer, bishop of the Oak Grove church. Bishop Allgyer was assisted in the ordination service by N.E. Troyer and John Y. King, both of West Liberty. Three trustees also were appointed that day: Peter Miller, Roman Miller, and D. Walter Miller. On Sunday, April 2, 1933, the group officially chose "Sharon" as the name for their new congregation.

Sharon continued to meet at the Resaca location thru 1937 at which time they began construction of their own church house along Amity Pike. The first Sunday services were conducted in the not-yet-completed church house on January 9, 1938. Unfortunately that first meeting house was destroyed by fire on Sunday, October 15, 1938. But that is another story.

Before closing, I'll share one more historical tidbit from our Sunday-school history. William A. Miller, the man who was so instrumental in guiding our Sunday school along the path to becoming a church, married Fern Yoder on November 18, 1934. Fern had been part of the new Sunday school from the beginning, and she and William became acquainted in the course of his service to us as a mission Sunday-school worker. William and Fern remained a part of the Sharon church until 1937, when they and about twenty other folks uprooted from Plain City and re-located to the newly established Britton Run Mennonite Church in Crawford County Pennsylvania. The reason given by the group for their departure—Plain City and Madison County had become "too crowded." Wouldn't William be shocked to see the transformation of our community that is happening today in 2026—one-hundred years after the beginning of the little Sunday school that he shepherded toward becoming Sharon Mennonite Church.