THE LADIES AID SOCIETIES IN
MICHIGAN METHODISM

By Ronald A. Brunger

Our church historians have largely ignored the existence of the oldtime Ladies Aid Societies. Before the Woman's Society of Christian Service was organized in 1940, virtually every Methodist church had a Ladies Aid Society. For three-quarters of a century those societies played an important role in Methodism. Yet William Warren Sweet's Methodism in American History never mentions the Ladies Aid Societies. The Story of Methodism by Halford E. Luc­
cock and Paul Hutchinson speaks of other Methodist institutions but overlooks the Ladies Aid Societies. The new official three­
volume History of American Methodism, Emory Stevens Bucke, editor, does not mention the Ladies Aid Society in its index.

The Woman's Foreign Missionary Society, organized in 1869, and the Woman's Home Missionary Society, organized in 1880, were quickly set up on both a conference and national basis. Since these organizations reported to the Annual Conference and since their statistics were printed in the conference journal, they have received due recognition from the historians.

The Ladies Aid Society, of course, was strictly a local organiza­
tion, serving the local church constituency and the community. It was not organized on a district, conference, or national level. Lack­ing connectional organization and statistics on a conference basis, the Ladies Aid Society has failed to receive due attention from the historians.

Without doubt the Ladies Aid Society was an important organiza­
tion in Methodism from the time of the Civil War to 1940. In 1927 Elmer Houser said unequivocally in an article in the Michigan Christian Advocate:

The Ladies Aid Society is the backbone of most of our Churches, and . . . the most indispensable agency in the Church. Many a weak church, in town or country, depends on the Ladies Aid Society to bring up the pastor's salary, current expenses and benevolences, all of which would show serious deficits but for the efforts of these faithful and tireless workers. And when a building project is launched, or a debt-raising, in the average church the 'Ladies Aid' is expected to, and does, make the biggest subscription. And always pays it!

Called on to speak at the fiftieth anniversary of the Ladies Aid Society of First Church, Royal Oak, Houser raised the question as to the origin of the Ladies Aid. Much research, he claimed, had turned up nothing. He concluded that the Ladies Aid Society, like Topsy, had "just grewed."

While it is difficult to find authentic, comprehensive data on the early history of the Ladies Aid Society movement, recently pub-
lished histories of Methodist Annual Conferences, particularly Herbert Heller's *The Indiana Conference of The Methodist Church*, supply some information. Also, the histories of local churches and the files of nineteenth century newspapers are helpful.

Near the middle of the nineteenth century there was considerable activity and thought among American women. Prior to that time woman's place had been strictly in the home. Her assignment there was heavy—large families, cooking over fireplaces, spinning and weaving cloth and making the family clothes. Under the circumstances the women had little time or strength for interests outside the home.

But by about 1850 life was becoming easier for the women. Cookstoves began to take the place of fireplaces; spinning and weaving were no longer necessary. Women began to assert their rights. In 1848 a convention was held at Seneca Falls, New York, with Lucretia Mott and Elizabeth Cady Stanton as the leaders. In the spirit of the Declaration of Independence, a resolution on women's rights was drafted, saying, "We hold these truths to be self-evident: that all men and women are created equal. . . ." The women went on to say that man had denied to woman the right to vote, taken away her rights in property and to the wages she might have earned, denied her the opportunity of obtaining a thorough education, and monopolized "nearly all the profitable employments." The convention demanded that women be accorded "immediate admission to all the rights and privileges which belong to them as citizens of the United States." ¹ The leaven of the Declaration of Independence, frontier equalitarianism, and Jacksonian democracy, was at work.

This ferment over women's rights was soon evident in Michigan. The Hillsdale *Standard* for January 9, 1855, announced a forthcoming feature, "A Lecture on Man's Duties and Woman's Rights," to be given by a Mrs. M. T. Emerson of Cincinnati.²

Women in the mid-nineteenth century began to assert themselves in church and community activities. "Sewing Societies" and "Sewing Circles" began to spring up.³ In some instances it was a "Missionary Society." As early as 1828 the Illinois Annual Conference received a donation of $6.46-1/4 from the "Female Domestic Missionary Society of Madison, Indiana," to be presented to the "most needy." ⁴

According to Herbert Heller, the Indiana Conference historian, Ladies Aid Societies were being formed as early as the 1850's. His claim is corroborated by a statement in an early record book to the

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² Editorial Committee: The First Methodist Church of Hillsdale.
³ Heller, Herbert L.: The Indiana Conference of the Methodist Church, p. 231.
⁴ Heller, op. cit., p. 39.
effect that the Ladies Aid Society in Tecumseh, Michigan, was organized in 1854 by Rev. William Pitt Judd.

Seldom at this early stage were the women's church organizations called Ladies Aid Societies. Many different names were used. The trustees' records of First Methodist Church, Grand Rapids, reveal that a "Ladies Benevolent Society" was active there in June, 1844. "The Ladies' Benevolent Society of this . . . church . . . is entitled to much praise for the efficient means taken in carpeting the House, trimming the Pulpit, and procuring Lamps." 5 Evidently the organization was functioning in the typical Ladies Aid way. The Ladies Benevolent Society was reorganized on October 14, 1857, as "The Ladies' Social Society," and its object was "to assist the church socially and financially." Its successor in 1866 was "The Ladies New Church Furnishing Society." 6

A "Sewing Society" was organized in 1850 in the Wall Street Church, Jeffersonville, Indiana. It "was composed of women and girls of the church, who met and sewed, made tatting and fancy work, in the afternoon, remaining to supper at the home in which they met; the men came afterwards, and they then had a jolly social time." 7 The organization became in 1876 the "Ladies' Sewing Society." Meetings were held in the homes and "such articles as bonnets, aprons, table spreads, quilts, etc. were made for which there was a ready sale." Beginning in 1880 each member was expected to pay dues of ten cents per month. This organization did not take the name "Ladies Aid Society" until 1903. 8

In 1854 the women in the Tecumseh church organized. Their organization was known as "The Methodist Aid Society" in 1864. At that time the Tecumseh Methodists were building a new church edifice which incidentally still stands. The Tecumseh Herald, June 16, 1864, mentions a Methodist Fair:

The Fair. Given by the ladies of the Methodist Episcopal Church yesterday afternoon and evening was very well attended considering the excessive warm weather. . . . The tables were very well arranged and bespoke great credit to the ladies engaged in getting it up. The Ice-cream and Lemonade stands seemed to receive their share of patronage. "Uncle Sim" officiated as auctioneer during the latter part of the evening, and by his genial smiles and lively words kept the crowd in a constant fund of good humor. The proceeds of the entertainment amounted to $200.

The same paper for July 28, 1864, says, "The Methodist Aid Society will hold its next meeting at the residence of R. Ford, on Friday evening, July 29." 9

At Chelsea, a Mite Box Society was organized in 1857, to raise funds for building a church. The admission charge was five cents

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5 Ware, Joseph D.: First M. E. Church, Grand Rapids, 1835-1911, p. 11.
6 Ibid.
7 Heller, op.cit., p. 232.
8 Ibid., p. 233.
9 The early files of the Tecumseh Herald are in the Tecumseh Public Library.
for ladies and ten cents for gentlemen. In 1860 the name was changed to “Ladies Sewing Circle of Chelsea” and still later it came to be known as the Ladies Aid Society.10

At Ypsilanti on July 20, 1864, an old group called “The Ladies Benevolent Society,” was reorganized as the “Ladies Benevolent Association of the M. E. Church,” with an elaborate constitution and by-laws. “Any lady” could become a member by paying five cents dues at each meeting and signing the constitution. Gentlemen, too, could join by paying dues of one dollar per year and signing the constitution.11

Around 1860, the Ladies Aid Society in the Galesburg Church was said to be flourishing as a strong arm of the church.12 At Allegan there was a Ladies Social Union in the 1860’s, its purpose being “to promote the religious and social welfare of the church, to appoint and hold social gatherings, to raise money by such legitimate means as may be devised and approved . . . and to keep up the parsonage.”13

During the Civil War, the women of all the churches in the larger towns of Michigan, united to form “The Soldier’s Aid Society” to collect, prepare and send supplies of food and clothing to the soldiers. Weekly meetings for sewing were held in such towns as Grand Rapids, Monroe, and Hillsdale. The Hillsdale president issued a patriotic if pompous declaration:

Women of the Northwest, falter not nor grow weary. Let every Aid Society buckle on the armor anew. Let every farmer whose cellars are filled with plenty, send the Commission what he can spare. Let our young people have profitable good times, for the sufferers. Let us all keep on working as the boys keep suffering and fighting.14

The Soldier’s Aid Society in Monroe met on Friday, June 3, 1864, and packed a box of valuable clothing for the union refugees. Two additional boxes were prepared and sent to the Michigan Aid Society at Detroit. They contained the following items:

From the society at the Young Ladies’ Seminary—6 calico shirts, 22 cotton handkerchiefs, 10 linen do, 5 pair socks, 1 do slippers, 8 pillow cases. From the society at Milan—6 pair canton flannel drawers, 3 shirts, 1 pair socks, 1 roll bandages, 6 bu. dried apples. From Mrs. Moulton, London—1 package dried fruit . . . “ 15

The value of the largest box was about $60. Evidently individuals and auxiliary organizations sent their contributions to the organized Soldier’s Aid Societies in the larger towns.

10 “History of the First Methodist Church. Chelsea.”
11 Records of the Ypsilanti Methodist Church, in the Michigan Historical Collections of the University of Michigan.
12 Meader, R. E.: History of the Galesburg Church.
13 History of the Allegan Methodist Church.
14 The Monroe Commercial Weekly, June 9, 1864.
15 Ibid.
These Soldier's Aid Societies, so numerous during Civil War days, apparently helped to give a common name to the women's societies which had been spontaneously springing up in the churches. When the ladies of First Church, Lansing, organized April 20, 1868, their group was called the Ladies Aid Society. The society proceeded to make money. A tea party was arranged at which ice cream and lemonade were sold to "those who wished" to buy. The women cleared $97 at a Fourth of July celebration at the Fair Grounds. A profit of $25 was made on an oyster supper served during the winter.\textsuperscript{16}

A Ladies Aid Society was organized in the church at Wayne about 1865 by Mrs. J. W. Kellogg, wife of the pastor.\textsuperscript{17} The society languished and was revived in 1870, with a constitution and by-laws which provided for dues of 25 cents per year. Men could become members by paying one dollar in dues; children could join by paying 12½ cents. In 1872 a new parsonage was built in Wayne, the Ladies Aid Society doing its share to raise the necessary funds.

At Monroe the women of the church organized as the Pastoral Aid Society, April 15, 1868, on the "suggestion and advice" of the pastor.\textsuperscript{18} The following year "The Ladies Society" with a membership of 21 was reorganized with the golden rule as its motto. Actually the ladies at Monroe had been active and had organized as early as 1865. The Monroe paper for June 15, 1865, said: "The Ladies of the Methodist Episcopal Church give a Strawberry Festival at the City Hall, tomorrow (Fri.) evening for the benefit of the Sabbath School." On Dec. 13, 1865, there was an oyster supper for the benefit of the Methodist Sunday School.\textsuperscript{19}

There is evidence that Ladies Aid Societies sometimes languished and had to be reorganized. For example, an early record book at the Dixboro church says that the society was organized June 5, 1885. Yet the minutes of the trustees' meetings of that church show that the women must have organized at an earlier date. On November 7, 1870, an unpaid claim of a former sexton was presented to the trustees, and a committee appointed to raise the money was instructed to "consult with the officers of the Ladies Aid Society with reference to assuming the debt." Also, at a meeting of the trustees on December 5, 1878, a bill for $17.55 for "cistern repairs and sundries furnished the church" was allowed. The minutes continue: "On motion resolved that the Ladies Aid Society be requested after paying Mr. Carpenter's account to appropriate [sic] the money raised at Socials to aid in repairing church roof."\textsuperscript{20} In July, 1872, the Dixboro

\textsuperscript{16} The History of the First Methodist Church, Lansing, 1846-1946.
\textsuperscript{17} History of the Wayne Ladies Aid Society, by Mrs. Mary Hawley, 1923.
\textsuperscript{18} Early Minutes of the Monroe Ladies Aid Society, in possession of Mrs. A. M. Gesell.
\textsuperscript{19} The Monroe Commercial Weekly, June 15, 1865, and December 7, 1865.
\textsuperscript{20} Minutes of Trustees' Meetings, Dixboro Methodist Episcopal Church.
ladies held a strawberry social. Thus it seems clear that the Ladies Aid Society in the Dixboro church was organized as early as 1870.

In April, 1873, the official board at Cadillac in northern Michigan gave anxious consideration to the unpaid board bill of the pastor. The board voted “to borrow a sufficient amount to meet the bill from the treasury of the Ladies Social.” 21 This was just two years after the first sermon had been preached in Cadillac, and it meant that already the men were relying on the ingenuity and work of the ladies to help finance the church. The historian of the Cadillac church says, “For many years the Ladies Aid was the guiding women’s group, where many a need and problem of the church was successfully worked out.” 22

A one-room Methodist church was built at New Boston in Wayne County in 1868. A Ladies Aid Society was flourishing in the church in the 1870’s:

They would meet once a month at the home of a member and serve dinner and the men would come to eat at noon. In summer we had ice cream or strawberry socials and in winter there would be oyster suppers and chicken pie suppers, served in a hall, and everyone would come regardless of religion. Sometimes we had box socials when the women would fix a lunch for two and put her name inside and wrap them up fancy. They were sold at auction.

. . . In the April town meeting and election, the Ladies’ Aid served dinner and the young ladies waited on table . . . At our suppers, often when there was cake or anything special, it was auctioned off. There was a lovely cake frosted and decorated with candy so it was saved to auction off. The man that bought it took it home and when it was cut, it was made of johnny cake! Well, you can imagine the talk. It was bad for awhile.” 23

These examples show that by the 1860’s, and 1870’s, local women’s societies were common in Michigan Methodist churches. Some were called Ladies Aid Societies, and some went by other names. But they were all engaged in organizing social events, and in raising money for the churches. As early as the 1870’s, the Ladies Aid Societies were becoming a tower of strength to the local churches. 24

21 First Methodist Church, 80th Anniversary—Cadillac.
22 Ibid.
24 W. Guy Smeltzer, Methodism on the Headwaters of the Ohio, New York: Abingdon, 1951, p. 300, says that the benevolent and philanthropic work carried on by women during the Civil War in the middle west found expression after the war in numerous societies which worked for woman’s suffrage, temperance, evangelism, and missions. He points out that the General Conference of 1872 created a “Ladies’ and Pastor’s Christian Union,” and organized a board to promote it. The aim of this organization, says Smeltzer, was evangelistic, but as time passed it became a woman’s church aid organization which raised money for the local church and for the maintenance of the parsonage. Smeltzer says that by 1908 the name of the Ladies’ and Pastor’s Christian union had been changed to “Ladies Aid Society.” This writer has found no evidence to show that the Ladies’ and Pastor’s Christian Union was taken seriously in Michigan Methodism after the General Conference of 1872. Moreover, Ladies Aid Societies in Michigan did not rise in the wake of the Ladies’ and Pastor’s Christian Union; they were in existence prior to 1872.
In the latter half of the nineteenth century, the churches assumed community leadership in recreation. As is well known, the Methodists and some other denominations frowned on card playing, dancing, and the theater. There were no motion pictures, radio, or television, and not as many books and magazines as now. Socials, suppers, lectures, debates, and later singing schools, were considered as proper forms of entertainment and recreation. The women in the churches usually took the lead in arranging for such activities in the community.

The historian of the Grand Rapids First Church says that for years the Ladies' Social Society, organized in 1857, had a program of two socials a month.\footnote{The West Leroy Church, a small rural congregation south of Battle Creek, had a similar program. The Battle Creek Weekly Call for November 28, 1877, referring to the West Leroy Church, said that a social “was held at the residence of Mrs. Mariah Alvord on the evening of the 20th instant,” with about 50 persons present.\footnote{On December 12, two weeks later, the same paper said that “a social for the benefit of the M. E. Church was held at the house of Henry McNay Friday night December 7th, which from the proceeds and exercises of the evening proved highly profitable. May they continue.” The Michigan Tribune, published in Battle Creek, said on January 9, 1878, “There was a social held at C. Farmer’s barn on Friday evening last for the benefit of the West Leroy M. E. Church Society.”} The Tecumseh Herald for November 10, 1864, announced: “The next Social of the M. E. Church will be held at the residence of D. Waring on Friday evening. Let there be a general attendance.”

A notice in the Monroe Commercial Weekly for May 7, 1868, said, “The young ladies of the M. E. Church extend a cordial invitation to our citizens to attend a social, which they will give at the parsonage, tomorrow (Friday) evening, for the benefit of the church.”

Socials were a prominent feature of the life of the churches in the Upper Peninsula. The Newberry Church was organized in the fall of 1883. The September 9, 1886, issue of the Newberry News says:

The ladies of Newberry are respectfully invited to donate such refreshments as they can to the M. E. social Friday evening. All such donations will be thankfully received. . . Friday evening at the old school house, the M. E. Church Society will give a social which is expected to eclipse anything in the way of enjoyment ever given in Newberry. A most excellent program has been arranged, and refreshments will be served. The object is to secure funds for the Rev. Chas. Holden and as the project is a most worthy one and the people are sure to get their money’s worth in a jolly good time, we have no doubt but that all who can will avail themselves of the opportunity to attend.

\footnote{Ware, Joseph D., op.cit., p. 11.}
The Newberry Church advertised a pumpkin pie social for October 1, 1886, saying, "A short literary program has been arranged for the occasion and everything put in shape for an enjoyable time. The proceeds will go towards paying the indebtedness on the parsonage." The next week the News stated bluntly that the pumpkin pie social "was not a success." apparently a snowstorm which raged for two days cut down attendance.

The Stephenson Church in the Upper Peninsula, which was organized in the spring of 1882, quickly took leadership in the field of entertainment, as indicated by the following items in the Menominee Herald during 1885:

February 19: The ladies of the M. E. Church are getting up a dime reading and J. E. Laycock will read a piece. . . . Attend the "Dime Reading" by all means, a good entertainment furnished for 10 cents in the new school house Friday evening, Feb. 20th commencing at 8 o'clock.
March 5: The sociable at the residence of Mrs. Bowers last Friday night was a very pleasurable affair and a handsome sum was realized for the minister.
April 23: Extensive preparations made for exercises at Laycock's hall on Friday night. . . . This entertainment promises to be an excellent one, the admission is 25¢, reserved seats 35¢.
June 4: Church Social. Mrs. J. E. Laycock entertained the church sociable on Friday evening last. There was a good attendance and a pleasant evening. A good collection was taken for the benefit of the cause. Mrs. Marson also rendered a couple of pieces very nicely, and they were appreciated. . . . Mrs. Bowers and Mrs. Phillips sang, one of the sweet old chapters excellently.

Obviously the church socials consisted mostly of recitations and songs, followed by food and fellowship. Occasionally a play was presented. The admission price was nominal. The proceeds went to the church, frequently to some particular cause.

The Ladies Aid Societies in the 1870's and 1880's had other seasonal and delightful ways of making money, such as sugar parties in the early spring, strawberry festivals and ice cream socials in the summer, oyster suppers in winter, and big community dinners on July 4 and at Thanksgiving time.

The West Leroy Church had a well rounded program of social events, as indicated by the following notations in the Michigan Tribune:

Feb. 22, 1879: There was an oyster supper at the residence of Daniel Reasoner on Tues. evening for the purpose of raising money for books of Sabbath School Library. Nearly 60 persons were present and the net proceeds amounted to $8.50. All in attendance declared that they had a splendid time.
Mar. 20, 1880: W. Leroy. A sugar party was held at the residence of Daniel Reasoner's on Tues. evening for the benefit of the M. E. Church. Receipts net $10.
Feb. 25, 1881: W. Leroy. There was an oyster supper held at the home of D. Reasoner, Tues. evening last, for the benefit of the West Leroy M. E.

27 Brunger, Ronald A.: The History of the Newberry Methodist Church, p. 10. the author.
28 Items collected for "The History of
For many years oyster suppers were favorite social events in the churches. As early as 1865, the Monroe Church held an oyster supper in the city hall for the benefit of the Sunday school library.\(^29\)

The oysters were served in different ways, according to a person's preference—raw, soup, escalloped, etc. When served in homes, as they usually were, the oyster suppers involved much work. Oyster soup was prepared in great wash boilers. After sponsoring one such affair in her home, one good woman declined to do it again.

Strawberry festivals and ice cream socials were popular in the summer. As early as 1865 the ladies of the Monroe Church held a strawberry festival at the city hall for the benefit of the “Sabbath School.”\(^30\) The Monroe paper, June 9, 1870, announced, “The Annual Ice Cream and Strawberry Festival for the benefit of the M. E. Church will be held at the residence of I. E. Ilgenfritz.” The cornerstone of the present Monroe Church was laid at 2:00 P.M., June 9, 1869. That same evening the “Ladies of the Church” held an ice cream and strawberry festival. Apparently they regarded the festival as an appropriate way to celebrate the important event.

In the fall of 1885 the Dixboro Ladies Aid Society held a “New England Supper.” On August 13, 1886, the society gave “an ice-cream social to which gentlemen were invited. There was a large crowd present.” On July 4, 1890, a ten cent social was held. Apparently the event featured lemonade, since $1.58 was spent for sugar and lemons. In August, 1890, the Dixboro society held an ice cream social at the Philo Galpin farm for the benefit of the minister. Again on July 29, 1892, Dixboro had a very successful ice cream social on the church lawn. The women served ice cream and cake for ten cents a dish and realized $8.85.\(^31\)

The churches prepared big community dinners for Thanksgiving. The East Leroy Church planned a social for Thanksgiving eve in 1879 “at which oysters and such refreshments as are generally expected in celebrating that day will be served in the basement of the M. E. Church at East Leroy.”\(^32\) In 1886 the Ladies Aid Society at Stephenson gave a Thanksgiving dinner in Laycock’s hall for the benefit of the church:

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\(^{29}\) The Monroe Commercial Weekly, December 7, 1865.

\(^{30}\) Ibid., June 15, 1865.


\(^{32}\) Michigan Tribune, November 29, 1879.
The dinner and supper given by the ladies of the M. E. Church on Thanksgiving Day was a grand success in every sense of the word. The tables looked very neat and the waiters as attentive as could be and anyone who went away without satisfying his inner man could blame none but himself. They netted almost $40, which is doing very well indeed.\(^{33}\)

The Azalia Methodist Church arranged for a Thanksgiving Dinner in 1898:

There was a large crowd at the M. E. Church to the Thanksgiving entertainment and supper. The pieces were well rendered and a bounteous supper of turkeys and chickens was provided. A very enjoyable time was spent.\(^{34}\)

Toward the end of the nineteenth century the city churches began to use more sophisticated ways of making money. By that time lectures had become popular, and usually they drew good crowds. In the fall of 1878, the Ladies Aid Society of First Church, Grand Rapids, had a committee to secure entertainments for the coming winter. The most prominent entertainment offered during the winter of 1880-1881 was a lecture by John H. Vincent, later bishop, on "That Boy’s Sister." The program netted $107.66 for the Ladies Aid Society.\(^{35}\)

The women of First Church, Grand Rapids, had a reputation for raising large sums for their church. In December, 1866, they loaned the church $200 for the first payment on a new church lot. While the new edifice was being built in 1868-1869, the women worked hard on many projects and raised over $3,400, a large amount of money for that day. The society carpeted the church and cushioned the pews. The best materials were purchased. The women worked in relays, using two sewing machines. They were ably assisted by Pastor Jocelyn “who could do anything well.” It was said that the task was accomplished with great credit to the ladies, and to the complete satisfaction of all.\(^{36}\)

In Court Street Church, Flint, the Ladies Aid Society offered a lecture course in the 1880’s. The lecture committee of five was headed by a man. At the outset the church was large enough to hold the crowd, but attendance grew and they had to engage the Music Hall, which was always well filled on lecture nights. One year the Ladies Aid Society realized about $1,000 from its lecture course. It was claimed that “hundreds of souls were helped to a finer taste.”\(^{37}\)

Another activity of the women in both city and rural churches was quilting. In 1888, as the Garland Street Church in Flint was erecting its building, the Ladies Aid Society made a quilt which

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\(^{33}\) Menominee Democrat, November 27, 1886.

\(^{34}\) Brunger, Ronald A.: History of the Azalia Methodist Church, p. 28.

\(^{35}\) Ware, Joseph D.: First M. E. Church, Grand Rapids, 1835-1911, pp. 11-16.

\(^{36}\) Ibid.

became famous and which has been preserved to the present time. The quilt bears the names of all the members of the church at that time, the names of many other people in the city, and a number of advertisements. In various ways this quilt brought a total of $2,000 to the society. It won first prize at the county fair many times.

The women of the nineteenth century loved to gather around a quilt form, to share their problems and the neighborhood gossip, and to work busily with their hands. Quilting might be done in connection with a regular meeting day of the Ladies Aid Society or the ladies might give extra days to the project. From our point of view today, quilting required many hours of tedious work for the amount of money the societies received, but the quilts had a ready sale and the women enjoyed working together.

The women of the church had still other ways of raising money. A Monroe historian says that the Ladies Aid Society there—in addition to the maple sugar socials, strawberry festivals, ice cream socials, and oyster suppers—held mush and milk socials, calico apron and neck tie socials, and chicken pie socials. As soon as the Azalia Church had built its Sunday school annex in 1898, the Ladies Aid Society proceeded to give a very successful chicken pie social. The box social was popular in the rural areas. One year when the Stephenson Church was behind with its financial obligations, Mrs. Sawbridge, the wife of a doctor, held a box social at her home and to the thrill of the people raised a total of $80 for the church.

In those years the usual charge for a church supper was ten cents! There are records of the price of ten cents for suppers at the Dixboro and Azalia churches. In the Tecumseh church the women had an unhandy kitchen in a hallway leading to the basement stairs, and had to carry the food a considerable distance to the lecture room where the people were served. It was not convenient, but then few of the women had things convenient in their homes. In the 1890's the price of church suppers was raised to 15 cents, and there was much argument as to whether people with families could afford them.

In view of their money-raising activities, by about 1890 Methodist women were beginning to be a power in the church. For a long time women were not named as members of the official board or of church committees. However, by the late years of the nineteenth century, women were serving on committees and on the official board. When the church treasury was low, the laymen often appealed to the women for help. In 1892 the Tecumseh official board

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28 Garland Street History, in the Conference Historical Collection.
29 Mrs. A. M. Gessell, in a letter to the author, April 1899.
31 Ibid., p. 39; also History of the Stephenson Methodist Church, p. 39.
“very respectfully” invited the “Ladies to pay what they can afford to, out of the Ladies Aid Society for Cleaning the Church & making the necessary repairs on the Church, & the ballance [sic] be drawn on the Treasurer.”  

First Church, Grand Rapids, built a parsonage in 1853. Two years later the trustees, noting that there was still a debt of $300 on the house, invited “the ladies to assist the trustees in paying the parsonage debt.” Since there is no further reference to the debt in the records, presumably the ladies responded to the appeal of the trustees. In the 1890’s, the Grand Rapids women financed the building of another parsonage.

Near the end of the century, churches in many places were building additions so as to have a dining room and a kitchen for the work of the Ladies Aid Society, as well as more Sunday school room. In Dundee the Ladies Aid Society financed an addition to the church in 1887, and the letters “L.A.S.” were placed in the stained glass peak above the door. In 1898 the women of First Church, Grand Rapids, financed the building of a new kitchen, and they paid for repairing and redecorating the church. The latter included new carpets, new pews, new chairs for the Sunday school, and new lighting and heating. One circle held a sale of fancy articles to raise money to pay the cost of bulletins for the Sunday services. The Azalia women helped to finance an addition to the church in 1898.

The Ladies Aid Societies had no conference or national organization, and for many years they had no generally accepted constitution or charter. Each society drew up its own rules. Some societies had elaborate constitutions.

The Dixboro Ladies Aid Society at its reorganization on June 5, 1885, elected a president, vice-president, treasurer, and secretary, and then adopted the following rules:

1. The object of this society shall be to raise funds for general church work.
2. Any person paying a membership fee of fifteen cents per year may become a member of this society.
3. The admission fee for each meeting shall be ten cents.
4. The meetings shall be held every two weeks and shall be opened each time with devotion exercises.
5. Every member is expected to entertain the society.
6. The supper shall consist of tea, biscuit and butter, one kind of plain cake, cookies, one kind of sauce, and a choice of any two of the following—pickles, cheese, baked apples and cold meat. Any person violating this rule shall pay a fine of twenty five cents.

These Dixboro rules are suggestive of the spirit of the Ladies Aid Societies.

The Ladies Aid Society meetings in the early days were always opened with devotional exercises, and usually there was a program,

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43 Brunger, Ronald A.: History of the Tecumseh Methodist Church, p. 95.
44 Ware, Joseph D.: First M. E. Church, Dixboro Methodist Church, p. 7.
as well as business. The Dixboro Society met December 17, 1886, "at Mrs. Matteson's. . . . The meeting . . . opened with reading of the scripture by Aunt Jane Crippen followed with prayer by the pastor, afterward singing. The minutes were then read and approved. There was a reading by Mrs. Freeman Galpin." The minutes for July 14, 1892, say that "Miss Marie Galpin kindly favored us with a recitation entitled 'The Blacksmith's Story,' followed by a select reading by Miss Lillian Tedmen who read extremely well for a small person, after which Allie and Marmie sang like a couple of nightingales." 46

The minutes of the Dixboro Society for March 7, 1894, are of interest:

Although Mrs. Hanby is not one of our members, she kindly opened her house, & entertained the Society. . . . There was a large number present, & I should judge her hen coop was made to suffer for it, by the platters of cold chicken which were passed. The exercises of the day were conducted by Bro. Gibson, & was opened by singing, & a short prayer by him, & repeating the Lord's Prayer in Concert. Followed by Scripture verses by those present. The minutes of previous meetings were then read. Selections were read by Mrs. Newkirk, Mrs. Bert Galpin, & Miss Mate Galpin, interspersed with singing by Bro. Gibson. Bro. Newkirk was then called upon for remarks and gave us some good words, with which he seems always ready. Matie Galpin & Edith Campbell then gave a guitar duet. An invitation was then given to any present to accept Christ. Closed by singing in concert, "God be with you. . . ." The Treasurer reported $9.15 collection, but by the addition of $1.00 sent to the Society by Miss Mary Keedle the neat little sum of $10.15 was raised for the pastor. 47

The Ladies Aid Society in the early years customarily drew up elaborate and finely worded resolutions of sympathy when a member died:

At a regular meeting of the Ladies Aid Society of the M. E. Church, of Dixboro, held Sept. 8, 1898, the following resolutions were adopted. Whereas He who doeth all things well, has seen fit to take from us of our number, and Whereas—We would not ask that anything but the Lord's will be done, although our hearts may bleed with sorrow, Be it resolved—that in the death of Eliza Ann Covert this society has lost one of its most faithful and earnest members, one whose place it will be hard to fill, That we extend to the afflicted family our heart-felt sympathy and at the same time breathe a prayer that the "Comforting Christ" may be to them a present help and lead their feet into the way of peace. That a copy of these resolutions be presented to the family and also spread upon the records of the society.

Mrs. Nellie Bush, Pres.
Mrs. Emma Shuart, Sec. 48

Near the end of the nineteenth century, the Ladies Aid Societies began to hold annual fairs or bazaars. Supper was served and there was a sale of aprons, fancy goods, quilts, and other articles made by the ladies in their homes, at Society meetings, or in sewing bees. In addition, sometimes there was a sale of articles donated by neighbor-
ing merchants. The Monroe society held its first bazaar, December 7, 1886. A New England dinner was served in connection with the bazaar for 25 cents per person, including the entertainment for the evening. The "Bill of Fare" consisted of pork and beans, turkey, chicken, brown bread, johnny cake, white bread, escalloped potatoes, beet and cucumber pickles, ginger cake, doughnuts, coffee, tea and cranberries. Ice cream and cake were served later in the evening. Total proceeds for the day were $62.65.49

In December 1889, the Ladies of First Church, Grand Rapids, held a famous fair at Hartman Hall, which netted over $600. The next December the Society cleared $780 on another supper and fair with booths representing the seasons.50

Few church buildings around the turn of the century had a basement, a kitchen, or a dining room. Some churches had local halls which the women used for their activities. But at that time most of the oyster suppers, chicken pie suppers, Thanksgiving suppers, fairs and bazaars were held in homes which were crowded to the limit when the people attended in large numbers. The Dixboro Society held a Christmas fair in a home in 1901, serving supper to more than 100 persons. With the coming of the twentieth century, the churches began to build dining rooms and kitchens.

The money-raising activities of the Ladies Aid Societies involved much hard work, but the women enjoyed the fellowship. Serving church suppers became more or less traditional, with few people questioning the procedure or asking if there were better ways to raise money for the churches. The women were used to hard work in their homes. Besides, the events gave meaning and purpose to their lives; putting on church suppers was a practical way for the Marthas to feel that they were serving their Lord and their church. In addition, the church suppers welded neighborhoods and churches into true communities, and did much to promote fellowship among church members.

There were cultural and spiritual values in the Ladies Aid Society meetings which, as we have seen, opened with devotional exercises and included a program. The Ladies Aid Society was a fellowship. The organization's suppers and bazaars served to draw the people together, giving them something to go to in a time when meetings were fewer than today. Witness the minutes for the Dixboro Society for March 1, 1894:

Notwithstanding the condition of the roads, the largest number that ever gathered in our Society met at the home of Mrs. A. Covert. We had a very pleasant time and to the consternation of the hostess the wash benches had to be brought in in order that those present might be comfortably seated...51

49 Mrs. A. M. Gessel, letter to the author.
50 Ware, Joseph D., op.cit.
As already indicated, the Ladies Aid Societies raised money for the churches. Through their multifarious activities they collected large sums, and as a result they became more involved in church business and in matters relating to church property. Business matters were discussed in society meetings. In December 1886, the Dixboro Society had a paper hanger present at its meeting, and the women voted to pay $80 for papering the church, “Mr. Gillemore to do the papering.” But at the meeting on February 11, 1887, “it was decided that the president should see the paper hangers and let them know that the papering was not accepted as satisfactory, a part of the side wall being wrong side up.” In 1893 the society paid $40 for painting and papering the church, $26.42 for repairing the gallery, and $9.23 for repairing the steeple. At one time the store bill was reported as follows: Lamp burners 45¢, stove polish 10¢, paper tacks 5¢, shingle nails 49¢; total $1.09.

Of course, the Ladies Aid Society did not devote itself exclusively to the task of raising money. The women sought to serve the church in other ways and to help needy folks in the community. On one occasion the Dixboro Society “decided to meet at the church on next Wednesday at ten o’clock to finish cleaning.”

In 1904 the General Conference finally recognized that there were Ladies Aid Societies in the churches! Women were first admitted as delegates in that General Conference. Soon afterward the Michigan Conference Minutes began to include a column for listing the amount of money raised by the Ladies Aid Societies. In 1910 the journal showed that the Ladies Aid Societies of the Conference raised $76,078.

In 1911 a small book for the guidance of Methodist Ladies Aid Societies was published. It was entitled, “The Ladies Aid Manual,” by R. E. Smith. The author’s aim was to “tell how to organize and conduct a Ladies Aid successfully.” The book contains a suggested constitution and by-laws, Article II of which says, “The object of this society shall be the promotion of the spiritual, social and financial interests of the church.” The book gives an order of business, rules of order, and some suggested scripture lessons and prayers. There are ideas for receptions, dinners, luncheons, and entertainments, along with games for social evenings. The chapter on “The Official Relation of the Ladies Aid to the Church” says that the pastors have a duty to organize and maintain Ladies Aid Societies and that the district superintendent should inquire into their condition. The section on entertainments suggests charging 25 cents for an “Automobile Social,” which includes refreshments and a short ride: “The great majority of people rarely get the opportunity to

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62 Ibid., p. 8.
ride in an automobile and this kind of a social will appeal to them. It has proven a great success wherever tried.”

By the time of the first World War the Ladies Aid Societies were apparently becoming more and more preoccupied with business matters, as indicated by the minutes of the Tecumseh Society meeting in 1916:

The L.A.S. met Oct. 19 with Mrs. Jennings. . . The meeting opened with two vocal selections by Edna Taylor, meeting called to order . . . minutes of last meeting read and approved. Mrs. Updyke reported that she had talked with members of the Official Board in regard to having a cupboard built for dishes and silver. They gave her permission to have the work done. . . Mrs. Belding reported that she was making arrangements for a Jap. booth for the fair. . . The Chairman of the fancy work reported $7.34 taken in at the 13 party given. . . It was suggested that we have a clean up day, proceeds from Junk sold, go to buy utensils for the kitchen. Mrs. Belding offered their tram to gather junk. . . Mrs. Jennings served the Ladies with tea & waffers. Meeting adjourned.

The reader will note that there was no worship, and only a nod given to cultural matters. Instead of an elaborate supper, the hostess served tea and waffles. The Ladies Aid Society was changing. Following the lead of the city churches, the circle plan was adopted in Tecumseh in 1917.

In Dundee the price of dinners was raised to 20 cents in 1908, with suppers remaining at ten cents. In November 1915, however, it was “Moved . . . that we get 20¢ for supper & 25¢ for dinner from now on.” “Light refreshments” were served in connection with the regular meetings, as in Tecumseh. There is one reference to “very dainty refreshments.” As at Tecumseh, the Dundee women were giving much attention to small bills, and to church and parsonage maintenance and repairs.

In 1918-1919, the Tecumseh women bought a vacuum cleaner, paper towels, dish towels, and a teakettle; they paid for oiling the street, painted the parsonage, and gave $100 on the janitor’s salary. About 1920, they put on the annual fair and bazaar, held a patriotic party, gave a cantata in the opera house, served meals for a two-day Sunday school convention, and served lunch for men who worked on the church sheds, and for the district ministers. They charged 40 cents for a chicken pie supper in 1922; a year later the charge for a church dinner was 75 cents. In December 1922, the church was damaged by fire. The following April the society agreed to pay for a new pulpit and a communion table. “Motion made the Ladies Aid if in case the Men cannot help us we take it upon ourselves to put in hardwood floors and seats. Motion carried.” That year the women raised $593.40.

In 1925, the Detroit Conference recognized the Ladies Aid Society
by devoting a column in its minutes to the "Amount contributed by Ladies Aid Society." The total was $255,446. Since the Michigan Conference figure for that year was $217,369, the grand total for the state was $472,815. In 1928 the state total was $584,668. The next year the total raised by the societies in the two conferences dropped to $487,343. As the great economic depression progressed, the figure fell in 1933 to $227,932. It rose to $372,449 in 1940, the year the Ladies Aid Societies went out of existence.

Perhaps it is fair to say that in many churches, the hard work of the Ladies Aid Society became a substitute for stewardship. Churches took the line of least resistance; they depended on the women to make money from suppers, bazaars, and other activities with which they would bail the church out of financial difficulties. As the twentieth century progressed, it seemed that a change was overdue. Life became more complex. People belonged to more community clubs and organizations. They had more magazines, books, and hobbies. Many customs were greatly altered by the automobile and the radio. The church was no longer the sole or the main social focus of the community; it was no longer the leader in community recreation. Under the circumstances the multitude of traditional money-raising affairs began to be a burden to many church people. Some realized that if the members of the church would practice Christian stewardship as they ought, their church would not have to depend on the money-raising activities of the women to pay its bills.

As already noted, the devotional exercises in some of the Ladies Aid Societies became perfunctory. The organization no longer provided a spiritual and cultural uplift for the women. Church leaders noted that there were few women in the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society and the Woman’s Home Missionary Society, as compared with the large number in the Ladies Aid Society. They felt that somehow the vision of the average member of the Ladies Aid Society should be enlarged. The solution was to develop one woman’s organization in the church which would be concerned with both missions and local church activities.

The unification of the three major Methodist churches in 1939—the Methodist Episcopal Church, the Methodist Episcopal Church, South, and the Methodist Protestant Church—provided the opportunity for the enlarged program for Methodist women. The Ladies Aid Society, the Woman’s Foreign Missionary Society and the Woman’s Home Missionary Society were united in "The Woman’s Society of Christian Service." This organization has had remarkable success in enlisting the interest of Methodist women in missions as well as in the work of the local church. The Ladies Aid Society in effect became the department of Christian Social Relations and Local Church Activities of the Woman’s Society of Christian Service.
In the past quarter of a century Methodists generally have been more serious about their obligations in the area of the Christian stewardship of money. The churches generally do not depend as much on the women for finances as they did prior to 1940. Even so, the Woman’s Society of Christian Service, while never allowing its interest in missions to flag, has continued in the best tradition of the former Ladies Aid Society to give strong financial support to the average local Methodist church.