Dixboro Church
The Village Church with a Global Vision
By Dale R. Leslie
(2014)

When traveling by horseback in the thinly populated rural Detroit area in the early 19th century, the thick landscape of bristle-brush and trees with out-stretched branches poked at riders and rubbed the sight from their mount’s unprotected eyes.

Nevertheless, a Presbyterian minister, William Jones, served as a Circuit Rider pastor in 1829 and visited the communities of Ypsilanti, Carpenter’s Corners, Stoney Creek and Dixboro.

Dixboro Founded

It was in 1825 when a newly-arrived easterner, a former sea captain- John Dix, platted three parcels of 469 acres in Superior Township including a village Square for a church and a school. The hamlet evolved as Dixborough and later Dixboro. However, Dix and his wife, Mary, moved to Texas in 1834 to escape their unpopularity with the locals. Mary Dix was accused of shining deer; the practice of flashing a light in a deer’s eyes temporarily blinding them for harvest.

Donaldson Circuit includes Dixboro

In the 1850s, the Reverend Ira W. Donaldson persevered in completing a frequent pastoral route and staged several well-attended, protracted religious revival meetings in Dixboro, five miles east of Ann Arbor.

Dixboro Church is built in 1858

Twelve close-knit-area-families decided in 1857 to organize a congregation and build a New England-style church where the faithful could worship. The budget for construction was established not to exceed $2500 with a $700 mortgage. When their dream church with its white steeple reaching skyward was completed in 1858, the final building expense was $260 below budget and it was finished on time.
Looking north, from Plymouth Road, circa 1915.

**Church Membership reaches 75; 46 join during 1906-07**

The number of Dixboro Church members reached 75 in 1861. There were regular church services, weddings, funerals and an adjacent horse stable was built. The first coat of new paint was splashed on the building in 1877. The annual church record indicates that 46 members joined the congregation, 1906-07.

“Meanwhile, the hamlet grew to at least two hotels, a couple of taverns and sawmills and Robert Shankland’s general store, which remains open today,” notes Tom Freeman, a resident familiar with its history. He added, “You could mail a letter there. A ‘Dixboro’ postmark existed until 1905.”

The Dixboro Church early on.

*Note: 2009 150th Anniversary Observance Program*  
http://ctnannarbor.org/video/992/2008-dixboro-mi-united-methodi
Memorable Clergy
By the turn of the century, 25 clergymen had answered the call to serve in the Dixboro pulpit, each for no more than a three-year stay. Several clergymen endeared themselves to the Dixboro congregation.

The Reverend J.R. Cordon (1870-72) published his own newspaper- the Superior Good News- and preached the Word from the pulpit and in print, especially about the evils of alcohol. Rev. Cordon also said emphatically, “Remember the Sabbath Day and keep it holy” and cautioned his congregants about too much activity on Sunday.

In his last newspaper published before departing Dixboro, Cordon encouraged his parishioners to “greet the new preacher fervently and that a 5-10-dollar bill be left in the palm of his hand during a welcoming handshake.”

The Reverend Ronald Brunger’s (1937-40) legacy featured his compiled, detailed history of the church’s first 80+ years. He and his fiancée were married in the Dixboro church after his pastorate concluded there in 1940. Brunger photo, right.

Footnote: At first, Rev. Brunger’s marriage eligibility drew the attention of Grace Conklin Patrick, the matriarch of my mother’s family. She suggested, recalls my mother Grace, that “Rev. Brunger would be a good catch for a husband.” Fortunately, in deciding the minister was not a suitable match, Grace the daughter married a local man, Richard D. Leslie. Mom: “I thank you, my sons thank you and my grandchildren thank you.” (Apologies to George M. Cohen)

Rev. Loren Campbell arrives
Begins a mid-century change
“The building needed a new coat of paint. And the interior was pretty Spartan,” recalls Reverend Loren W. Campbell upon assuming the Dixboro ministry from the Traverse City area in 1947.
uring Loren Campbell’s unprecedented 10 year-pastorate at the village church, he smartly harnessed the ambition, strong backs and enthusiasm of the returning WW II Veterans who shared his sense of dedication to the community and a vision of marriage and family rearing. Included in the mix were my parents (right), Richard D. and Grace P. Leslie.

**Lord’s Acre Tills the Soil**
Shortly after his arrival, Rev. Campbell implemented a novel plan from his seminary training at Oberlin and planted the seed for building expansion. The project was reverently named “Lord’s Acre.”

In a farmer’s field (front row, left to right) – Rev. Loren W. Campbell, R.A. Mildner (farm owner); Howard Fishbeck, Clinton J. Leslie, Clinton N. (Bud) Leslie and Gary N. Leslie. (In the rear, left to right) - Fred Phillips, Jr. (seated) and his brother Clyde.
When dawn broke on September 13, 1947, a handful of church and community members launched the Lord’s Acre cooperative farming project with the plowing and planting of 10 acres of the R.A. Mildner Farm at 6119 E. Joy Road, north of Dixboro.

Later, the proceeds of the wheat harvest were earmarked for the Dixboro Church House addition, which would double the size of the church.

6,000 hours of donated labor by the parishioners & friends
A remarkable story unfolded in 1949 of Christian fortitude and dedication in completing the Church House. Volunteers from all paths donated over 6,000 hours in construction labor.

At the 11th hour, before the building’s dedication, he graciously covered any remaining bills to become debt-free. The second floor fellowship hall was paneled in knotty pine.

The church house nears its completion (1951).
Education Wing added in 1968
Almost 20-years later, a redbrick addition was built by contract labor of church school classrooms, a fellowship-meeting hall and a kitchen. Freeman recalls, “The contents of a time capsule placed in the southern wall of the new building included the program from the 1951 service of dedication of the first addition, copies of deeds to church property acquisitions, photographs of the choirs from Mother’s Day, 1968 and an 1969 U.S.A. penny.”

Mission Outreach is Major Emphasis
The Dixboro congregation is modestly proud of mission support locally and internationally. For many years, clothes and hygienic supplies were send to Kewadin Indian Mission in northern Michigan. The Dixboro United Methodist Youth (DUMYs) shoulder their tuition and expenses for the highly regarded Mountain Top hands-on experience in improving the poverty level of Grundy County, Tennessee.

A major portion of the proceeds from the annual Dixboro Fair held in August on the Village Green is earmarked for worldwide missions.

Church House a Thanksgiving Home for Students

A Christian outreach in the 1950s to the students at the University of Michigan who remained on campus during Thanksgiving vacation was extended by the church families who gathered for an old fashioned Turkey dinner with all the fixings in the Fellowship Hall.

Football Chicken Dinners a 35-year Tradition
In 1961, a long-standing fall tradition, the serving of homemade chicken dinners to U-M football fans returning from the Michigan Stadium along Plymouth Road, concluded a three-decade plus run in the basement and later the new Church House fellowship hall. Jennie Henry, a senior member of the church, would often bake 35 pies for each dinner. New highways that swept fans to and from Detroit led to the dinner’s demise.
The Music Ministry Keeps the Praise Going
When Janice A. Clark began her tenure as the exceptional music director in 1971, no one would have predicted, including Janice, that she would fill that post for over 40 years. Her talent on the piano sparkled when she played a medley of the congregation’s favorite hymns without a piece of sheet music. Janice retired as an Associate Professor of Music at the University of Michigan. The “Joyful Noise Praise Band,” organized in the past 20 years, provides a contemporary interpretation of music and complements the church’s traditional style of worship.

Reverend Tonya Arnesen is the current pastor
In 2014, the Reverend Tonya Arnesen, the church’s first female head minister, oversees the 300-member church. Reverend Mary Hagley serves as Minister of Children and Youth.

The weekly highlight in the church calendar is the 10:30 a.m. Sunday worship service in the beautiful restored sanctuary. Church school for all ages is available at 9:45 a.m.

The worship service begins with a church tradition: the ringing of the church bell high in the belfry.

In addition to the piano, a full pipe organ and an experienced and open-to-new-member choir accent the service in the quaint sanctuary.
Dixboro Garage, circa 1940; at the center of the little burg (now an antique store)

**Dixboro UMC Clergy and Wives (125th Anniversary, 1983)**

Ministers shown posing with Bishop Edsel A. Ammons & his wife: (Front row, left to right) Ronald A. Brunger (1937-40); James A. Craig (1960-63); & Robert C. Strobridge (1968-70); Second Row, left to right) Loren W. Campbell (1946-1955); W. Cardwell Prout (1934-36); A. Theodore Halstead (1956-1960); & Archie T. Roberts (1963-65); (Back row, left to right) Robert P. Garrett (1965-68); Ann Arbor District Superintendent Robert A. Selberg & Haldon D. Ferris (1974-1983).
A community-sponsored reunion brought many Dixboro Church members, past and present, together. A Dixboro Farmer’s Market, not related to the church, is held on the Village Green on Fridays during the summer.

My later grandparents Leslie on Plymouth Road; Church in the background (1910s)

Dixboro Church oldest parishioner, Donald Staebler, 103
http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E VheGe9Nfww

Faith in Action – “Now faith is confidence in what we hope for and assurance about what we do not see.” (Hebrews 11:1)