

**PROFILE OF
TALMADGE HILL COMMUNITY CHURCH**



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Basic Information

- Talmadge Hill Community Church, established 1870.
- Location: Lower Fairfield County, Connecticut, on the border of Darien and New Canaan. The Congregation draws from several neighboring towns in Fairfield and Westchester Counties.
- Denomination: Unaffiliated. Recent Ministers have been drawn from the UCC and the Presbyterian Church.
- Membership: 65 families
- Active and engaged individual members: Approximately 120
- Worship: Currently Sunday services are at 10:00am; Historically the Church has supported two services at 9:00am and 10:30am (Family Service)
- Typical attendance: 35-50
- High-quality preaching, with broad appeal to the congregation.
- A congregation that is engaged and responsive during worship.
- Highly respected Ministers with a clear passion for our Church and beyond, and their calling.
- A highly valued music program with original music and an active choir.
- Strong and active men's and women's groups, including several small "covenant" groups.
- Active Bible and book study groups.
- Small and intimate Sunday School and a youth program (high school) to be re-formed.
- Strong Missions Program, characterized by active participation and financial support (22% of the Church's annual budget).
- In 2020, Talmadge Hill Community Church celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding.

Talmadge Hill Community Church is a vulnerable place. It is not under siege or facing existential crisis, rather it is a place of radical hospitality where all views are welcome. It is a safe place. The ministers speak from an open heart, meeting us all in those dark places we often fear to be, in the places we are hurt or broken. They speak not only from scripture and God's many lessons but more importantly, from their own lives. The pronoun of the pulpit is "I", and most often the message is not a direction but an invitation to change, to bind our mutual brokenness and together fashion, from our inner shared vision, a better world to inhabit. ~ Tim Kenefick

History

The simple white chapel of Talmadge Hill Community Church (THCC) is in a sylvan setting at the intersection of Talmadge Hill Road and Hollow Tree Ridge Road, between the towns of Darien and New Canaan in southwest Connecticut. It has been an active place of worship continuously since it opened its doors in September 1870.

The chapel at Talmadge Hill was built by neighbors, out of timbers cut locally from a familiar design for churches of the era. Every part of the church's construction represents the joint efforts and aspirations of neighbors who desired – then and now – a place for worship and the spiritual education of children. The building is a starkly lovely design, reflecting the late gothic revival architectural style. Behind a small entrance vestibule, which features a historic bell that welcomes the community every Sunday, lies a chapel interior with simple wooden pews and the capacity to seat 100 people. The floors are foot-wide, old pine boards. Tall gothic arched windows look out upon a small contemplative garden. A small adjacent community room accommodates church administration and small group gatherings during the week, Sunday school and fellowship hour after services.

By the early 1990s, the congregation of THCC had dwindled to an unsustainable size of less than 20 members. In 1995 those members boldly called the Rev. Michael Zeman to establish a new ministry steeped in community. Mich in turn approached Rob Silvan to be the Director of Music, and together they began to establish new energy and direction for the church. Their warmth and sense of caring immediately struck home with our small congregation. Mich initiated novel methods for addressing the church's infrastructure, including a community-based Americares project to repair and protect the church building. Together Mich and Rob shaped services of worship that touched the spirit, heart and mind of those present, quickly attracting new members. By about 2005, THCC had grown to its current size with an active congregation and a sense of stability that has endured.

The spiritual community built by Mich and Rob has grown and endured through almost 30 years, with the active contribution of several outstanding Ministers. In 2010 the Rev. Carter Via began to preach regularly at THCC, supporting Mich during a prolonged illness. In 2015, the congregation recognized Mich and Carter as equal co-Ministers of THCC. The following year Mich began another long medical leave that accelerated his retirement shortly before being called to God in July 2018. More than six years later, many in our church community continue to mourn Mich's passing and celebrate his legacy.

“Like many others, I was attracted to what Mich and Rob created. In a harsh and divided world, a culture marked by warmth and acceptance is a welcome gift. The culture is also blessed with creativity, critical thinking, and generosity of spirit. We appreciate art and poetry. We celebrate inspired music. We value provocation and deep learning. And always, we try to give away what we have been freely given. Talmadge Hill is a very special place. ~ The Rev. Carter Via

Continuing the unique THCC co-Minister model allowed THCC to maintain the continuity of Carter's ministry while also benefiting from diverse perspectives and both male and female voices in the pulpit. THCC was blessed to have the Rev. Susan Townsley serve as Interim co-Minister through 2017-2018. In December 2018 THCC called the Rev. Jennifer McCleery as part time co-

Minister, followed by Rev. Dr. Cheryl Bundy in December 2021 after Jennifer's departure. Cheryl is deeply committed to her full-time role as the Director of Spiritual Care and Hospital Chaplain at Silver Hill. Cheryl's clinical specialties are spirituality, grief and human flourishing and she works with patients to help them discover the role of spirituality in the healing process and lifelong wellness. Throughout this period of change, our Director of Music, Rob Silvan, continued to be a sustaining rock of the church community.

In February 2024, Rev. Carter Via announced his desire to retire from THCC by mid-2025, after almost 15 years of service.

Accordingly, THCC is now seeking a full-time Minister to lead our vibrant and engaged congregation. Our new full-time Minister will take over the leadership of the church along with the ministry and future with the continuing support of the Rev. Dr. Cheryl Bundy, who is graciously committing herself to continued support for the ministry at THCC in whatever form is needed.

"I came to Talmadge Hill to support a special congregation that I had long admired. I stayed at Talmadge Hill because the love and warmth there inspired my ministry and nurtured my spiritual growth. It was the call I didn't know that I needed and the new dimension of Christian worship that allowed me to witness the many ways that God is still speaking." ~ The Rev. Dr. Cheryl Bundy

Ministry at THCC

The mission of Talmadge Hill Community Church is to **Know the Love of God and Share It**. Our Christian faith is rooted in the Gospels, using the teachings of Jesus as our reference point, and is decidedly non-exclusionary. It honors the wisdom that is often well expressed in other denominations, religions and cultures. In other words, if it is true, then it must be true everywhere.

The experience of our community is often described as safe, inclusive, curious, open, non-judgmental, non-conformist and with a desire to do what we say.

"I came to Talmadge Hill in the late 1990's looking for an alternative to the large Presbyterian and Catholic worship services I grew up with. What I found was a warm and intimate church community with vibrant music and Sunday School for my kids and a wonderful minister with great sermons. The congregation was small enough so I couldn't hide even if I tried, the welcoming was so genuine. Over the years my kids were confirmed, and I was married in the church – we are active members and look forward to the future of the church with a new full-time minister!" ~ Russ Cooper

The culture of Talmadge Hill is casual and very committed. Worship is the heart of our shared life, expressed during our services on Sunday. Members and visitors are encouraged to "come as they are." We meet all wherever they are on their faith journey. We gather as a community to affirm God's loving presence in the world, to be provoked by the great stories of our faith, to be inspired by talented musicians and vocalists, to be comforted by the genuine warmth of caring people, and to be challenged to see how we are being invited to participate in bringing hope and healing to a suffering world.

Non-doctrinal in nature, our worship is welcoming and less formal than many churches. It blends the old and the new. Our music tends towards the contemporary. We choose to celebrate Communion every Sunday. In all aspects of worship, we seek to be dynamic and relevant,

believing that connection, unity and wholeness are the essence of our spiritual journey rather than belief and belonging systems.

*“I wasn’t raised with religion, but I’d always longed to find a spiritual home. After years of driving by the beautiful gem of a church and seeing the sign that reads “We Welcome You,” I summoned the courage to call. I said to the kindly voice that answered the phone your signs says we welcome you, but I’m not sure you mean the likes of me. Mich said you’re **exactly** who we mean. In my wildest dreams, I never could have anticipated that a phone call would change my life so completely. Words can hardly do justice to what Mich and Talmadge Hill Community Church have meant to me.” ~ Julie Kahn*

Our church is open and affirming. Theologically, we have a passion for serving God through service to bring heaven on earth. We seek to follow Jesus as participants in deconstructing systems of superiority and exclusivity, both inside and outside of religion. We recognize that Christianity is meant to be a loving way of life characterized by forgiveness, humility, compassion, generosity and healing, not just a system of beliefs and requirements that people hope will earn them a later reward in heaven. We seek to broaden our awareness of Jesus’ teachings of non-violence, simplicity of lifestyle, peacemaking and love of creation.

We are a congregation comfortable with paradoxes, expecting the journey of faith to be full of twists and turns. We understand the rich ways in which doubt informs our journey. There is an emphasis on faith as a process of inquiry and growth and an understanding that this is necessarily lived out in community. Many of our members have had another experience of church at other denominations, or other communities, and so they are here because of a choice, and because of their journey of spirituality and faith. A guiding principle for us is best described by Richard Rohr: The best criticism of the bad is the practice of the better. We are sympathetic to the messages summarized in the following restatement of Quaker pastor Philip Gulley’s words (from *If the Church Were Christian*) by Rohr:

1. Jesus is a model for living more than an object of worship.
2. Affirming people’s potential is more important than reminding them of their brokenness.
3. The work of reconciliation should be valued over making judgments.
4. Gracious behavior is more important than right belief.
5. Inviting questions is more valuable than supplying answers.
6. Encouraging personal search is more important than group uniformity.
7. Meeting actual needs is more important than maintaining institutions.
8. Peacemaking is more important than power.
9. We should care more about love and less about sex (read: morality will follow “right relationship”).
10. Life in this world is more important than the afterlife (eternity is God’s work anyway).

Preaching styles that work especially well here are personal, vulnerable, inclusive, warm, poetic and creative. People welcome being provoked from the perspective of personal vulnerability. “I am struggling with this; I wonder if you are too.” Our congregation expects to be able to connect sermons with their own lives and it is our conviction that we are all in a process of change and transformation *together*. Our transformed lives can transform other lives.

In keeping with the congregational tradition, the authority of the pastor is one of office, but must be earned by connection with the congregation, humility, authenticity, and the ability to lead while learning. Rev. Carter Via has regularly referred to himself as a “fellow traveler.”

Music plays an important role in our worship. People have called Talmadge Hill a laughing church, a clapping church and a crying church because people are so often moved in worship. It is also a piano church and a singing church with authentic, heartfelt and soaring voices.

Our music is always offered in the spirit of deepening the individual and collective experience of worship. It draws upon the classic hymns of our faith tradition, as well as gospel, jazz, rhythm and blues, and traditional folk. Music Director Rob Silvan creates original music that conveys the poetry of the Psalms and the Beatitudes as well as a noble host of other voices. We invite guest musicians and singers, feature beloved soloists, and enjoin our congregation to sing with gusto. Our regular music program offers opportunities for *everyone* to worship through music, whether in our choir, in our *Harmony on the Hill* Spring concert, in our December candlelight concert, or in the wholly original telling of the story of Christmas in our original pageant *The Innkeeper*, written by Rob and Mich.

“My sense is that the expansive language of music can help point to and even convey at times the endless depth of a “God of joy and sorrow.” Sometimes music allows for this by being simple and quiet and wide open and at other times by being dense and boisterous. So, the music is used not as performance but to enhance the words and rituals of the service and all together create a more personal sacred experience.” ~ Rob Silvan

Programming

Spiritual formation is a priority for THCC, and this takes on several forms in the life of the church. We offer weekly *Bible Study* and *Contemplative Prayer in Community* gatherings. We also provide a regular offering of educational and other special programming.

During the past year, we have continued our *Courageous Conversations* series, which is an interactive format intended to engage with the relevant topics of our day. We have been discussing the mental health crisis, seeking spiritual antidotes for anxiety, depression, and loneliness. We have featured an evening with Rob Silvan and John Ragusa, illuminating the beauty of relationship behind their creative synergy. We did a series based on the book *Life Worth Living* (Volf, Croasmun, and McAnnally-Linz) that included a half-day retreat at Grace Farms, which explored the existential questions of belonging and meaning in the context of our Christian faith. During Lent 2024, we held a weekly series entitled *Adult Re-Confirmation* which looked at our assumptions about God, Jesus, the Church, and the sacraments, and how these are shaping our lives and relationships. In the Fall of 2024, we held an Enneagram Workshop which led to a highly-engaged ongoing discussion group.

Prayer — both intercessory and contemplative — continues to till the fertile soil at THCC. And, of course, pastoral support of parishioners’ needs to be anticipated, met, and sustained.

“We hope people see spiritual formation as an ongoing journey that we get to experience together. We believe that God meets us where we are and ‘to know the love of God’ is the birthplace of true belonging and unique purpose. Our programming seeks to encourage

deeper awareness, self-knowledge, and relationship with God, self and others, all grounded in a counter-cultural Gospel of grace.” ~ Lisa Michalski

Men’s and Women’s Groups

Another form of spiritual formation is the vibrant men’s and women’s groups. The men’s group, known as the Cornfield, meets on the first Saturday of the month and holds an annual retreat. The Cornfield is well attended and for many men is a rare opportunity to share vulnerable conversations with other men.

The Women’s Circle has been an important priority over the past several years, as women in the church sought to build a group that matched the strength of the Cornfield. The group meets on the second Saturday of each month. Despite leadership by three different ministers over the past five years, the Women’s Circle has not achieved a sustainable, active presence in the church. Continued attention to the spiritual development of women in the church remains an important priority for THCC, whether through the Women’s Circle or some other response.

Both the men’s and women’s groups have spawned active “covenant” groups – smaller adult groups that commit to meet regularly to share from the heart, listen deeply to one another and encourage each other to grow in character and in faith. Much of our spiritual work aims to help us understand our motivations, our attachments, our unique gifts and a healthy sense of our limitations. To date all covenant groups have been formed for men or women, but we welcome further small-group formation that supports co-ed and other interests.

Spiritual Formation for Our Children and Youth

While our numbers make for a small church school program, the church demonstrates concern for the spiritual life and growth of our children. We try to capitalize on the benefits of a small community and the power of intergenerational connections, formal and informal, in developing Christian nurture for children.

THCC is committed to helping each child grow in faith and come to know the love of God for themselves. We aim to create an environment of learning, wonder, and opportunity to help children build a spiritual foundation in the Christian tradition. We create a welcoming environment, making youth feel valued and heard in the church setting. Our Sunday school is a safe and inclusive space, and our music program offers a variety of opportunities for youth to share their talents. Engaging youth in church and building a sustainable community over the long term is of great importance to us.

Given the size and demographics of our congregation, and the impact of Covid-19 on church attendance, our church school offerings have varied quite a bit in the last ten years. We have, at times, offered three programs when attendance by parents supported it:

- Younger children aged 3 to Grade 5 participate in our Sunday School program, based on the Godly Play curriculum.

- Middle Schoolers have been offered an occasional program known as SPARK (Spiritual Path and Righteous Knowledge), which seeks to engage them in faith development that is relevant to the issues that confront young people.
- A bi-weekly, Sunday evening youth program for students in High School. The SPARK and Youth Group are currently suspended, though it is our great hope to rebuild these programs. We have consistently heard from families that their children and teenagers value a social component that is missing from our very small groups.

Governance

Overall governance of the church rests with the congregation.

The church is overseen by an active and well-qualified Unified Board which comprises seven elected office holders and a few auxiliary roles. Board members serve for up to six years, each taking accountability for an area such as Finance, Stewardship, Education and Communication, Missions, Congregational Life, or Facilities. We encourage broader congregational involvement in the governance of the church via committees and working groups in many of these areas.

Ministers of THCC are ex-officio members of the Board and all Committees and charged with the management of church staff.

“THCC sits firmly in the New England tradition of congregational faith communities, even as it stands organizationally independent. Many church members carry experience of other denominations or faith traditions in which they were raised. In choosing daily to be a part of THCC, church members willingly contribute their time, talent and treasure to sustaining and building this community. One of the many rewards of being a small church is coming to know and call forth individuals’ unique gifts. After twenty-plus years at THCC I’m no longer surprised when a need or opportunity is answered by the flowering of someone’s perfectly matched talent and willingness to serve.” ~ Patrice Murphy

Missions

One long-standing commitment of enormous importance at THCC is our promise to donate 22% of our annual income. More than one out of every five dollars given to the church is put aside for missions-directed giving. Other Missions-specific gifts and generous in-kind donation of Christmas gifts and Thanksgiving food cards expand the proportional giving of the church by many thousands of dollars each year.

In overseeing the distribution of these funds, the Missions Committee seeks to generously and prudently direct the church’s resources to where we can make a difference and grow in relationship with those we support. More than writing checks, we seek to develop connection and understanding within the wide world of need – locally, nationally and internationally. Church members enthusiastically support the work of the Missions Committee and participate in hands-on mission activities.

“Our Missions giving covers a wide berth. From our local Missions in which we support and partner with the ABC (A Better Chance) girls here in Darien, to our long term, 25+ year national and international relationships with Fraternite Notre Dame in New York City and CRM (Children’s Rescue Mission) in Honduras. We are committed to these

relationships, causes and friends. They represent a core group of our more the 20 Missions partners. We continually assess existing relationships and are open to new opportunities to Know the Love of God and Share It.” ~ Suzanne Dean

Financial

As a small church, THCC operates on a relatively modest annual operating budget. Nevertheless, the church has been well managed for the past two decades and is financially very sound. Proceeds of property sales and generous gifts have positioned THCC as the beneficiary of two funds:

- One known informally as “the Endowment” was built on the proceeds of the original church parsonage, sold in the 1990s. Income from this fund provides approximately 20% of the current operating budget of the church, with considerable flexibility permitted in the use of funds.
- A “Minister Housing Fund” was created in 2015, again through the generosity of church members, to provide support for Minister housing in the environs of lower Fairfield County.

In addition, we have an unusually high degree of participation in the financial stewardship of the church, achieved with a deliberately light touch in giving solicitation. Some 80% of families pledge and our pledge reliability runs at or above 100%. This has enabled the church to remain financially secure, even during periods of economic downturn—a witness to the commitment of members to the church’s financial health. During the Covid-19 shutdown, prudent financial management secured government assistance that sustained our staffing commitments. However, even smoothing out the blip of Covid 19, the total level of giving has remained at the same level for some time, placing a natural limit on our ability to seed and support new programs. Like many churches, THCC’s long-term financial health will be underwritten by sustainable growth in our membership and giving.

Website and Social Media

The Church has a website that provides information and encourages engagement. This online presence is augmented by daily Facebook and Instagram postings. While social media engagement by the Congregation is not robust, we are mindful of trends in that direction and believe it is wise to invest in these capabilities.

Vision and Strategy

Talmadge Hill was poised to celebrate its sesquicentennial in 2020 with a robust year of programming and community building. Attendance and engagement were at a peak. While the pandemic did not dampen our spirit, we experienced the same dynamics as other churches – many people relocated or were out of the regular routine of going to church on Sunday morning.

In the Fall of 2021, the Unified Board and the Ministers decided to embrace the existing realities, honor what has always been true for our church, and begin again to look with aspiration towards the future. The result of this work is our **Mission, Identity and Vision** statement found in **Appendix A**. In April 2024, there was an all-church offsite (with an independent facilitator) convened to review

this document to discern if it was still representative of the church's values and priorities. This meeting was well-attended and served to strongly reaffirm how our congregation views who we are as a community of faith, and how we want to serve the broader community, both near and far.

To this end, in 2023 our Ministers prayerfully provided a theme for each calendar year that serves to shape our spiritual intentions, programming and preaching. The theme for 2023 was **CONNECTION** and brought a more thoughtful and prayerful approach to our connections with God, with ourselves, and with one another. The theme for 2024 was **BOLD HOPE**; additional information on this theme can be found in **Appendix B**.

While excellent work has been done by the leadership and congregation to define our Mission, Identity and Vision, there is a need and opportunity to develop strategies to implement them. We value the intimacy of our community, *and* we understand what is necessary for sustainability. We fully embrace our mission, *and* we recognize the energy, creativity and attention that is needed to truly live into our potential. We believe the best is yet to come, with bold hope!

Appendix A

Talmadge Hill Community Church / Mission, Identity, Vision

Our Mission

To Know the Love of God and Share it.

Our Identity

We are a progressive, relevant, responsive, critically minded, Christian community of faith. We welcome all persons who want to join our search for a deeper spiritual life and relationship with God.

- Worship is the heart of all we do, enlivened by devotion to God through prayer, relevant preaching, inspired music, and a joyful spirit.
- We build community by nurturing vulnerability and intimacy, and by growing and learning together.
- We invite the courageous study of scripture and reflection on the life and teachings of Jesus.
- We affirm the Gospel's counter-cultural message of relationship and belonging rather than competition and hierarchy.
- We express our love through service to the suffering, vulnerable and forgotten.
- In all things, we seek to offer our time, talent and treasure to the beauty and need of the world.

Our Vision

In our search for God's will, we aspire to be people who are teachable, who want to learn, grow and live lives of meaning and impact.

- I. A dynamic, radically hospitable community of faith that **WELCOMES** people from every stage and every circumstance of life.
 - We strive to accept each other as we are and welcome the presence and participation of all persons regardless of age, health, race, sexual orientation, gender identity, religious background or economic circumstance. Above all, we believe the church must embody the all-inclusive love of God and seek to build relationships with a diverse and ever-changing world.

"Hospitality is not to change people, but to offer them space where change can take place. It is not to bring men and women over to our side, but to offer freedom not disturbed by dividing lines." ~ Henri Nouwen

- II. A proactive community of faith that believes knowing the **LOVE** of God involves intentional spiritual growth and formation.
 - Jesus called disciples to learn and grow, to become people of courage and conviction, to live into spiritual integrity and

maturity. We believe a church must consciously seek to create a culture of discipleship.

- Scripture reminds us that people have a wide range of different talents. We aspire to be a church that facilitates and encourages people to identify and nurture their gifts and talents and provide opportunities within and beyond the community to celebrate and employ these gifts.

“Most of us were taught that God would love us if and when we change. In fact, God loves you so that you can change. What empowers change, what makes you desirous of change is the experience of love. It is that inherent experience of love that becomes the engine of change.” ~ Richard Rohr

III. A grace-filled, responsive community of faith that **CALLS** its members to the work of justice, healing and social transformation.

- We believe a church must be a hands-on, relationship-building presence in its immediate community and the wider world. We boldly venture into the world (and beyond our comfort zone) on a regular basis to be in solidarity with those on the margins and give ourselves to building God's kingdom on earth.
- We aspire to commit 25% of our operating budget to this mission.

“We must proclaim the truth that all life is one and that we are all of us tied together. Therefore, it is mandatory that we work for a society in which the least person can find refuge and refreshment. You must lay your lives on the altar of social change so that wherever you are, there the Kingdom of God is at hand!” ~ Howard Thurman

Appendix B



2024 Theme: BOLD HOPE

Our theme for 2024 was BOLD HOPE. Our Christian faith makes the profound distinction between hope and optimism, which is more about an attitude or sometimes just wishful thinking.

HOPE is grounded in our relationship with a good and loving God, who is at work for the healing and restoration of all people and all of creation. Often this is very hard to see. Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann defines hope “as trust in what God has done and will do, in spite of evidence to the contrary.” This is why we need community to encourage us, a healthy image of God to be in a trusted relationship with, and an active spiritual life, so that our worldview becomes more other-centric and less self-referential. We are ALL beloved daughters and sons of a God who promises us that we are never alone. That is a message worthy of great hope.

BOLD HOPE is a unique invitation to participate in the bigger picture. If “the arc of history is long and bends towards justice” (Martin Luther King, Jr.) AND we get to be a part of this incarnational plan, this is a hope that is bold, and courageous, and humble.

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