

**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 (pre-CV-19)
- Worship: Currently Sunday services are at 10:00am; Historically the Church has supported two services at 9:00am and 10:30am (Family Service); Summers 9:30am only
- Typical attendance: 15—20 at the early service and 60—80 at the family service.
- Very 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 a number of small "covenant" groups.
- Active bible and book study groups.
- Small and intimate Sunday School (two groups for ages 3 through middle 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).

"This church is extraordinary. Every time I am here, the Holy Spirit has been present and powerful. Sometimes it is a surging flood of strength and love and at other times it is a sense of peace and calmness. It fills me with what I need to become whole. It is clear that God is at work here using the minds, bodies, hearts, and resources of this church to build God's Kingdom here and now."

– Eric Remole, parishioner

History

The simple white chapel of Talmadge Hill Community Church (THCC) is located 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 more or less 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.

Evidence of the robust engagement of the church community came soon after, when Mich faced a prolonged illness. While he continued to lead the congregation, assorted guest ministers were brought in to preach, including the Rev. Carter Via. Over time, Carter developed a deep relationship with Mich and the congregation that was welcome to all. In 2015, the congregation recognized Mich and Carter as equal co-Ministers of THCC. While the development of a co-minister approach was driven by circumstances, THCC has grown to appreciate the many benefits this affords. Our ministers agree on a shared vision for the Church, but they each bring their own styles, sensitivities and gifts to their ministry. Our ministers often remark about how much they appreciate listening and learning from each other. For the Congregation, having co-ministers also provides comfort when one minister is absent for vacation, illness, sabbatical or during transitions such as this one. Historically, we have encouraged our co-ministers to lead worship and programming together as much as possible. We would anticipate that this would remain the normal model, but the Church is open to suggestions about different arrangements, especially if this helps manage outside time commitments.

By late 2016 the church was beginning to slowly prepare itself for Mich's anticipated retirement in 2020 when an unexpected injury precipitated another long medical leave – and accelerated his move to *Minister Emeritus* status at the start of 2018. Mich was called to God in July 2018. Our church community mourns his passing.

THCC called Rev. Jennifer McCleery in December of 2018 as part time co-Minister. Jennifer served in that capacity until November 2021. THCC is now calling a part time co-Minister to work alongside Carter to lead our church.

Ministry at THCC

The mission of Talmadge Hill Community Church is to ***Know the Love of God and Share It***. Church activities, on Sunday mornings and throughout the week, are authentic and intentional service to the healing and transforming nature of this mission. 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 has to 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 simply to sing in the choir once a month, nothing more. I stay because I've been challenged and loved in ways that have allowed me to evolve into the woman I believe God needs me to be, for my family and friends, my church community and for the world. I feel blessed to have walked into this church and more importantly that I stayed."

– Betsy Wilson, parishioner

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 each and 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.

"Through Talmadge Hill's weekly communion service, I am refreshed and recommitted on a regular basis. And, through our warm, friendly and informal style, I both feel welcome and am motivated to reach out and welcome others."

– Wilder Baker, parishioner

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, love of creation and becoming less self-referential.

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 within the Emerging Christianity movement, 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 the 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 deeply 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 will regularly refer to himself as a "fellow traveler."

Music plays an important role in our worship. People have called Talmadge Hill a clapping church, a laughing 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 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.

“There is no BS at THCC. No dogma and no pretense. THCC is an open-minded community full of welcoming and accepting individuals. It invites you to make deep connections to God, faith and to each other. We came so that our children could find a bigger vision of the world, to create space for God in their lives and so that they can experience kindness, compassion, love, service and a deep sense of community. I stayed because THCC is a place I can be vulnerable where I can share my brokenness with others. I have always longed for a deep connection with others – the THCC men’s teams have especially provided the opportunity for emotional and spiritual growth.”

– Barry Ludlow, parishioner

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. Given the size and demographics of our congregation, 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. Those levels were:

- Younger children aged 3 to Grade 5 participate in our junior program, based broadly in the Godly Play curriculum.
- Our SPARK (Spiritual Path and Righteous Knowledge) program for middle schoolers 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 CV-19 period greatly reduced the number of children attending Sunday services. At times in the past 18 months, we have hosted virtual Sunday School for our younger members. The SPARK and Youth Group are currently suspended, though it is our great hope to rebuild these programs.

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 sessions. We also offer a regular diet of educational and other special programming. During the past year, this included a book discussion of Barbara Brown Taylor’s *Holy Envy*, a sermon series and conversations on racial injustice, a series of “sermon talkbacks” hosted by the ministers right after worship, a series entitled mindfulness dialogue, and a program called Reimagining Religion. 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.

There are currently 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 gifting and a healthy sense of our limitations.

Men's and Women's Groups

Another form of spiritual formation are 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 it lacked ministerial leadership for many years. Over the past five years, the Women's Circle has been led by Rev. Susan Townsley and more recently by Rev. Jennifer McCleery. The group meets on the second Saturday of each month. Continued development of the Women's' Circle to meet our expectations for the potential of this group is an important priority for THCC.

Both the men's and women's groups have spawned active "covenant" groups. These groups are made up of 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.

Conflict and Disagreement

For several years, the level of conflict at the church was very low. There may, however, have been an element of conflict avoidance in the congregation, with people simply drifting away rather than broaching concerns or disappointment. More recently, there have been concerns raised about a historically male-dominated culture at the Church. The Board and Staff are interested in engaging with these concerns. Likewise, there have been spirited discussions around the Church's spiritual identity across the spectrum of what might be called "Christology." In November 2021 our Ministers released a *Statement of Identity and Vision*, which we hope addresses or at least engages these questions. More generally, we seek to be a Church that can sustain conversations on matters that may raise strong difference of opinion and still encourage respect and humility. We understand faith to involve a posture of learning, and disagreement is often the edge of learning. Similarly, it is a priority for us to become more aware of how better communication can serve to enhance our connectivity and understanding amongst the community.

Governance and Financial

The church is overseen by an active and well-qualified Unified Board which comprises eight office holders and a few auxiliary roles. Working to support our Ministers, Board members are each accountable for an engagement such as Congregational Life, Finance, Stewardship, Education, Missions, or Building & Grounds.

Ministers of THCC are ex-officio members of the Board and all Committees.

One committee which is of particular importance is the Missions Committee, which is responsible for overseeing the distribution of 22% of our annual giving which is put aside for missions-directed giving beyond the church. Other Missions-specific gifts and generous in-kind donation of Christmas gifts and Thanksgiving food cards lift the giving of the church by many thousands of dollars each year.

“Finding THCC felt like coming home for Bonnie and me. It feeds our souls, serves as a role model of generosity, and, best of all, expanded the number of folks we call family.”

– Kate Cummiskey, parishioner

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. However, 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. THCC would benefit from modest, natural growth of our membership and giving.

In 2020, Talmadge Hill Community Church celebrated the 150th anniversary of its founding.

Covid-19

Talmadge Hill has offered services continuously throughout the Covid period, pivoting first to virtual services in March 2020 and then to in-person worship for Fall 2020 and more regularly since Spring 2021. Our virtual worship offerings included both pre-recorded and live stream services. Educational programming such as Bible Study, Contemplative Prayer and Mindfulness Dialogue were also offered virtually. Currently, there is one in-person worship service per week and an audio recording of the Scripture Reading and Sermon are posted on the Church’s website.

Like many churches, Talmadge Hill is in a period of building back attendance. We believe engagement for some people did wane over the past 18 months due to zoom fatigue, risk tolerance, or simply getting out of the habit of going to church. Like many other places in the Northeast, we have also seen congregants move to warmer or less expensive locations. We are committed to building our congregation and offerings back to pre-Covid levels and hope the co-minister will assist in doing that.

Website and Social Media

The Church has a website that provides information and encourages engagement. This online presence is augmented by regular 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 2021 for Talmadge Hill Community Church

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.

“So we do not lose heart. Even though our outer nature is wasting away, our inner nature is being renewed day by day. For this slight momentary affliction is preparing us for an eternal weight of glory beyond all measure, because we look not at what can be seen but at what cannot be seen; for what can be seen is temporary, but what cannot be seen is eternal.” ~ 2 Corinthians 4:16-18

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

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