

The LEGACY

@ Church Hill Center

Wedding & Events Venue

Where moments become memories
etched into history...



GRAND OPENING

February 13, 2026 • 2:00 p.m.

311 North Joanna Avenue
Tavares, Florida



About The Legacy at Church Hill Center

The Legacy at Church Hill Center is a premier event venue in Tavares, Florida, specializing in hosting memorable occasions in a beautifully restored 1923 church setting. Founded by the passionate 96-year-old Gene Smith, who bought and renovated the property with hands-on involvement from his five children and several grandchildren, the venue is now operated by his children. Committed to preserving local history while providing modern elegance, it offers customizable spaces for events of all sizes, including the intimate Heirloom Chapel, expansive Centennial Reception Hall, cozy Lineage Lounge, and scenic Palms Patio.

The church has stood as a cornerstone of local history, witnessing generations of community milestones. The renovation accentuated the building's enduring character with thoughtful, modern elegance, preserving its sacred essence while adapting it for today's needs—aligning with Tavares' ongoing efforts to revitalize historic sites and boost local tourism near Lake Dora.

Further information may be found at www.thelegacytavares.com.



ORDER OF EVENTS

Opening remarks (front steps) – Lake County Commissioner Kirby Smith

Ribbon cutting ceremony (front steps) – Stephanie Hayes, Tavares Chamber of Commerce

Welcome (sanctuary, also known as Heirloom Chapel) – Cheryl Ritchie

Why Did Our Family Restore this Building? (sanctuary) – Gene Smith

Historic Church Hill Center (sanctuary) – Sammy Smith

Tour of campus: Palms Patio, Lineage Lounge, and Centennial Reception Hall – Cheryl Ritchie



Please sign the guest register located in the entryway of Heirloom Chapel.

Refreshments will be served in Centennial Reception Hall following the tour.

All rooms in The Legacy are accessible. For those who are unable to navigate steps, a lift is available to tour Centennial Reception Hall.

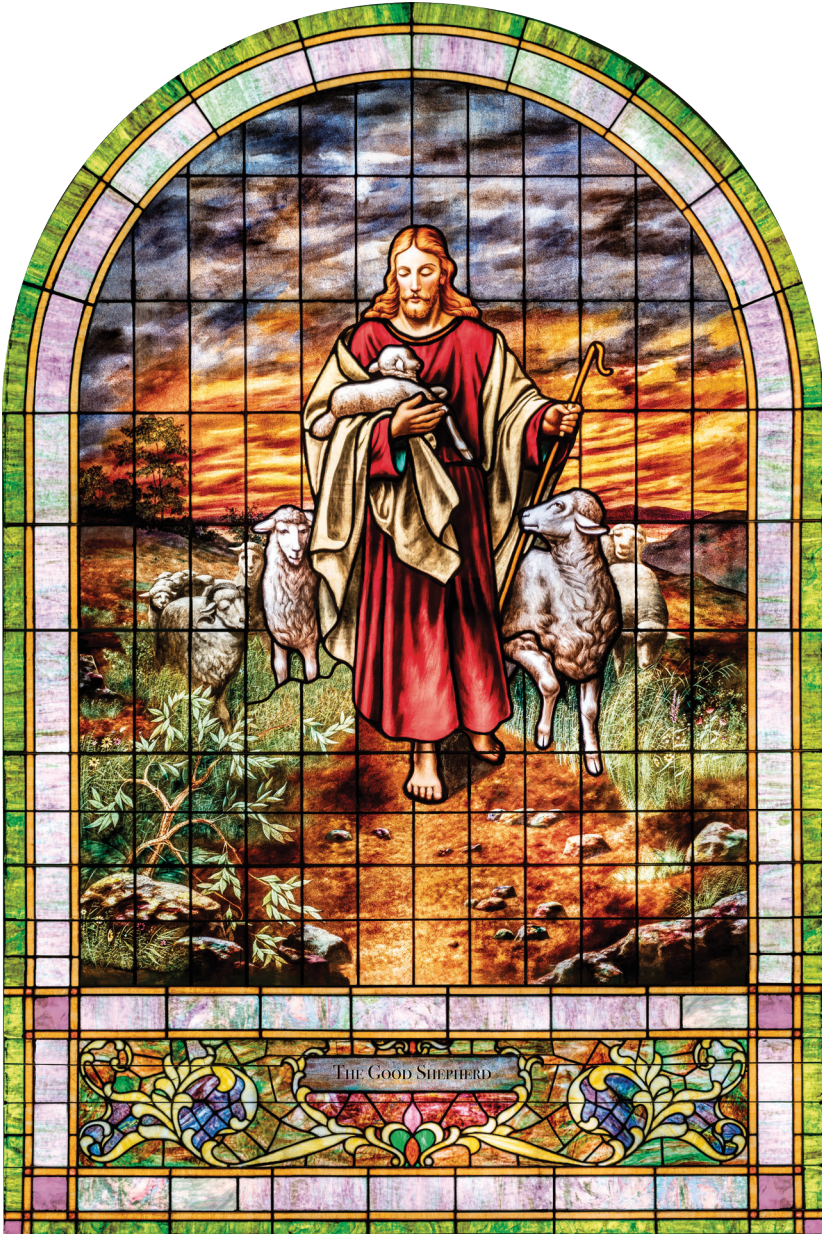
Restrooms are available in the walkway between the church and the office wing; a restroom is also available in Centennial Reception Hall.

Please note the bronze plaque on the front of the building listing the names of scores of people who worked tirelessly to restore this historic property.





The extensive cleanup and restoration from 2022 to 2025 included major repairs in the basement (now Centennial Reception Hall) and the sanctuary, where the heart-pine floors and stained glass windows were restored to their former glory.



"The Good Shepherd," as seen in Heirloom Chapel at Church Hill Center. The image was inspired by Bernhard Plockhorst's 1878 painting by the same name. The process of replicating the original windows, which had been moved to the Methodists' new building and later destroyed by fire, was developed over many months in collaboration with graphic designers, sign manufacturers, and printers.



"The Ascension," is one of two large stained glass replications in The Legacy's Heirloom Chapel. The final digital art for both large windows, "The Good Shepherd" and "The Ascension," was executed by graphic artist Teo Wollrabe in Portland, Oregon. The basis for both images came by the kind permission to photograph the 1924 stained glass windows at First Baptist Church of Groveland.





THE CHURCH ON A HILL

By Samuel Patrick Smith

In the late 1880s, a group of Methodists began meeting in Tavares at a venue called St. Clair Abrams Hall. When it was destroyed in the terrible fire of 1888 that wiped out the business district of Tavares, they began meeting at the local public school, which also had been built by Major Alexander St. Clair Abrams.

The Union Congregational Church completed construction of their building later that year. The Methodists made arrangements to meet there every other week. That continued for years, with occasional discussions about erecting their own building—but supplies were hard to get, and money was scarce.

By 1921, the Methodists had expanded to a congregation of 160 and had far outgrown the space at the Congregational Church. During a meeting to discuss building their own sanctuary, a member named W.G. Long offered to donate two lots he had purchased for \$500 on Joanna Avenue. He also said he would donate an additional \$500 to the building project.



They hired a 29-year-old architect, Ira Rice, from Umatilla, and in April 1923 got bids from two contractors. They decided in favor of the architect's former employer, Charles Z. Osborne, also from Umatilla. Osborne owned the lumber yard and quoted the reasonable price of \$10,171. Although Osborne missed the August 1923 deadline he had projected for completion, he finished the job in just six months. The first meeting at the church was on Sunday, October 7, 1923.



This was the second church Ira Rice had designed, the first being the Methodist Church in Umatilla in 1922, which contained elements from a variety of architectural styles including Gothic, Classical, Prairie, and Italian Renaissance.

For the Tavares project, Rice took a simpler, more unified approach with a Neoclassical design, sometimes referred to as Classical Revival style. The stained-glass windows reflect the influence of Art Nouveau.



Rice used a strikingly similar design for the Groveland Baptist Church, which opened in August 1924 and contained nearly matching stained-glass windows, but with elements of pink and aqua not present in the Tavares windows. In 1927, he offered a slightly modified design for the Umatilla Presbyterian Church, with windows influenced by the Art Deco artistic movement. All three churches featured large memorial stained-glass images of "The Good Shepherd" and "The Ascension."

Thanks to the beautiful architecture and the service of outstanding ministers over the years, the Tavares Methodist Church became a focal point for spiritual, cultural, and civic activities. The congregation steadily grew, and in 1956,



they added an educational wing. By the late 1960s, they had outgrown the building with about 575 members. Another local congregation, the Tavares Church of Christ, acquired the building for \$20,000 in September 1968.

Adjusted for inflation, the sales price to the Church of Christ was the same amount the Methodists had paid in 1923, without charging for the educational wing built in later years. The Methodists—now part of the United Methodist Church—built a new sanctuary near the intersection of Highway 19 and Old Highway 441. They took the two large stained-glass images with them. The decorative panels at the bottom fell into private hands. In 1998, the new building burned to the ground due to an electrical fire, destroying the original stained-glass windows.

Years passed and the old church building gradually fell into disrepair. As much as the new owners valued their meeting space, the size of the congregation did not afford enough money for upkeep. Termites invaded and the ravages of Florida's heat and humidity had their way with the aging structure.

In January 2022, local businessman Gene Smith arranged for the purchase of the property by his five children, Cheryl, Lee, Sammy, Jack, and Kirby, through their company, XS Properties. Gene first attended the church as a 19-year-old while visiting his Aunt Blanche during the summer of 1948, and later joined the church with his family beginning in the 1950s. He also taught Sunday School there for five years.

After the purchase, Gene worked tirelessly to turn the unused Sunday School rooms into office suites. He began a massive cleanup of the property in September 2022, with construction beginning in November 2023. The offices and sanctuary, with the reception hall and other rooms, received a Certificate of Occupancy in October 2025.

Ira Rice's near-duplication of the 1923 Tavares Methodist Church for the Groveland Baptist Church in 1924 proved to be fortuitous. Though the original memorial windows in Tavares had been destroyed by fire, the new owners were able to take photographs of Groveland's two large pictorial windows and create a process to replicate the colors and vibrancy of the originals. So the two images—"The Good Shepherd" and "The Ascension" returned to the newly restored building in the fall of 2025.

Because the sanctuary sits on a hill, Gene named the campus Church Hill Center. "I love this church," he said. "It was a much bigger project than I could have imagined, but I want it to be a place that benefits our entire community."

With his staff, he worked on the building every day for more than two years. Gene said, "We left no stone unturned. We did everything the best way possible to make sure this building lasts another hundred years."

The renovation went beyond anything Gene expected, but he has restored the property to its former glory—and even beyond. With today's high standards for construction, safety, and accessibility, we can confidently say that Church Hill Center is better than ever.



Termites, age, humidity, and vandalism contributed to the decline of the property.

TIMELINE

1880 – Major Alexander St. Clair Abrams founds the town of Tavares.

1888 – Fire destroys business district of Tavares, including St. Clair Abrams Hall, the meeting place for a local group of Methodists.

– Union Congregational Church is completed, and the Methodists arrange to use the building every other week.

1921 – The Methodist congregation outgrows its meeting space at the Congregational Church and plans are made for the construction of their own building.

1923 – The Methodists hire 29-year-old architect Ira Rice of Umatilla to design their building and grant the contract to contractor Charles Z. Osborne in April.

– October 7, Methodists hold their first service in the new building.

1924 – Ira Rice designs a similar building for the Groveland Baptist Church, which opened in August.

1956 – Educational wing for Sunday School rooms constructed for the Tavares Methodist Church.

1968 – Methodists outgrow their building with 576 members. Building is sold to the Church of Christ in September.

– Methodists move into a new facility and take the large memorial stained glass windows with them.

1998 – Methodists' new building burns to the ground, destroying the original 1923 stained glass pictorial windows of "The Good Shepherd" and "The Ascension."

2022 – In January local businessman Gene Smith purchases the original Methodist Church property at 311. N. Joanna Ave. from the Tavares Church of Christ. Cleanup of the property begins in September.

2023 – Renovation and construction begins in November.

2025 – Renovation is completed and Certificate of Occupancy is obtained in October.



Local businessman Gene Smith supervised the renovation of the church and educational building.



Top: Jim Hohman, Rudy Paasonen, and Austin Smith install the replicated panels of "The Good Shepherd," October 17, 2025. Bottom: Palms Patio in the courtyard at Church Hill Center.



Top: Front entrance to Heirloom Chapel at The Legacy, Tavares, Florida. PHOTO BY KIM COFFIN. Center: Centennial Reception Hall. Restored heart-pine floors in the sanctuary. Bottom: Bride's Room.

