Mount Cross
LUTHERAN CHURCH

Rooted in God's grace, we joyfully witness and serve.

Mount Cross Ages Gracefully

(By John Grennan)

It's 2026, and Mount Cross Lutheran Church is now 60 years old! Happy Birthday, and Praise the Lord! The milestone was celebrated in multiple ways throughout the year, including small gatherings of members around simple meals, a 60th anniversary edition of Make Bake Celebrate on October 3, and a heart-filling concert offered by our Music Ministry honoring 60 years of handbell and choral music on October 18. Our anniversary celebrations will culminate with worship on October 25, Reformation Sunday, where we will thank God for our congregation and rededicate ourselves to Christ's mission.

In keeping with tradition, now is the time to look back and reflect on the last 10 years in the life of the church. And what a decade it was, highlighted by a historic change in church leadership and the many struggles — and silver linings — church members and the world experienced during the COVID pandemic.

The decade also saw Mount Cross become a Reconciling in Christ (RIC) church, meaning it made a commitment to fully welcome, include, and advocate for the LGBTQIA+ community as we "strive to follow Jesus' way of love compassion and justice."

We sadly sent several beloved members, young and old, to eternal rest with God and joyfully welcomed many new members to the congregation. At 60, Mount Cross remains healthy, and vibrant, dedicated to doing God's work on Earth.

Changes in Church Leadership

In 2017, Mount Cross said farewell to longtime Pastor John Soyster, and then, after an interim stint by Pastor Jim Bessey, the church made history in 2019 by welcoming its first female and first non-Lutheran pastor, Julie Morris. Pastor Julie — ordained as an Episcopal priest — came to Mount Cross as part of the full communion partnership between the ELCA and the Episcopal Church. Unanimously selected by church vote, Pastor Julie continues to lead the congregation in its mission to "joyfully witness and serve."

The goodbyes and hellos didn't end there. Cathy Channels, founder and director of the Mount Cross Child Development Center (CDC) for more than 30 years, retired in 2021. The CDC continues to serve young children under the leadership of Amy Vega, hired later that year.

Also in the past decade, Mount Cross said hello and goodbye to Joe Zimmerly as youth director in 2025, a role now filled by Pastor Marc Mohr, who is the pastor for Children, Youth and Family Ministries. Dr. Cecelia Travick-Jackson was ordained a deacon at Mount Cross in 2021, developing a thriving Senior Ministry program, including the monthly Afternoon Chapel and many fellowship opportunities. Carol Browning first came to us as a volunteer musician during the pandemic shutdown, and then joined the staff as Office Manager later in 2020 and as Music Director in 2021.

She oversees the church's music ministries for our worship, and directs the handbells, choir, and praise band, blending traditional and contemporary elements to support our congregation's sung prayer. Guy Ervin III was our accompanist from 2002 until he retired in 2024, and we're grateful for all the music he gave us. In 2024, we were fortunate that Jessica Helms, well-known as an accompanist at California Lutheran University and throughout Ventura County, became available and took over as accompanist.

In terms of leadership and staff roles over the past 10 years, there would be too many people to recognize and thank for their service to the church, but, needless to say, we wouldn't be the strong community that we are without their hard work, commitment, and vision.

COVID Rocks the World

Coincidentally to be sure, just about the time that Pastor Julie became the new pastor at Mount Cross, COVID made its impact on the world. To prevent catching or spreading the sometimes deadly disease, isolation and online communication became the new norm.

At the time, Mount Cross was holding two services each Sunday, at 8:30 and 10:30 a.m. Because of COVID, one 9:30 a.m. service was held each Sunday via livestream (God bless Bill Dawson and his crew!). The one service and livestream continues to this day, even after restrictions were eased.

Even in COVID, however, the church and its members continued to do God's work in new and creative ways. Online meetings were held; drive-through Communion was offered in the church parking lot; and church members continued to help each other and others in need in a variety of ways.

COVID wasn't the only challenge faced by the church and its members. The 2024 Mountain Fire destroyed or damaged several homes in Camarillo, including four of Mount Cros community members, and threatened much of the area around the church. Again, the church came together to help its own and others.

Joyfully Witnessing and Serving

Staying true to its mission, Mount Cross continued to serve its members and the surrounding community over the past 10 years.

Many events continue to be held to bring church members together and deepen our faith: Make, Bake, Celebrate; Bible studies; Wednesday Meditation; multiple youth programs; Sunday hospitality after worship; and Lenten Soup Supper, just to name few.

Likewise, church members continue to look out for the needy in our community and the world at large. Many Meals; blood drives; Quilters; Tuesday dinner delivery; and shared events with St. Columba's Episcopal and Camarillo United Methodist Churches are just a few of the ways. We are committed to growing our relationship with these partner churches, calling ourselves the "Three Congregations." Most recently, Mount Cross was invited to sponsor a unit in a new housing project here in Camarillo for the unhoused.

Facilities Updated and Improved

We won't call it a facelift, but Mount Cross has also had its share of physical changes over the past 10 years, and it's come a long way since its humble beginnings in a theater on Mobil Avenue. Perhaps most notable are the installation of the outdoor pavilion and the renovation of the children's play area. The relighting of our large outdoor cross, a symbol of God, goodness, strength, and hope to many in and outside of the congregation, was also noteworthy.

Voices of the Church

Mount Cross is now 60 years old, and Becky Riley has been a member for 51 of those years. Her husband, Ken, has been coming since 1988 and the two married in 1990. Invited to Mount Cross by a friend, Becky, who grew up in the Presbyterian Church, has found a family here, one that has seen her through good times and bad. In particular, she recalls a family tragedy that she and Ken experienced 20 years ago and the tremendous support they received from Pastor John and many people in the congregation.

In addition to her long tenure with the choir, Becky has served in multiple leadership roles, including Church Council president at two different times. She has also served as an assisting minister under each of the pastors at Mount Cross, from Frank Nausin to James Miley to Soyster to Bessey to Morris, and been active with the Personnel, Mediation, Mutual Ministry, Service & Missions, Care Team, and Worship & Music committees. She calls the choir her "family within a family."

"I have enjoyed all of the pastors and have felt close to each of them in their own way," Becky said. "So, the people and the worship team is what has kept me coming all of these years."

A couple of years ago, she and Ken nearly moved to Monterey County. Mount Cross kept them in Camarillo. "I still remember sitting in church, looking up at our cross, looking around at the people we have become so very close to, listening to Pastor Julie, and becoming very tearful thinking that we were just about to walk away from it all," she said.

In reflecting back on the past 10 years, Becky said that the events that stand out most are the combination of Pastor John's retirement after 25 years and the arrival of Pastor Julie. Becky said, "Pastor Julie has been absolutely the right person for the times that we are in. I will always feel that the best thing I ever did for Mount Cross was to serve as co-chair with Bill Stoll on the committee that called her."

Like Becky, Ken says the pastors and the people are what stand out about Mount Cross. Raised in the Methodist Church, Ken asked Becky when they married why they couldn't go to the United Methodist Church. "Becky's reply was she goes not because it's a Lutheran church but because of the people," Ken said. "The people are so special, so warm, so caring, and dear friends. After all these years I know she was so right! The people have been so important and meaningful to our lives."

"I spent my professional career dealing with situations where people were harmed by the cruelty of others," he added. "Mount Cross became a place, a congregation that gave me hope and spiritual fulfillment. It gave me refuge from the pain and suffering I so often saw. It reminded of the goodness of life and people."

Also like Becky, he has great respect for all the pastors who have led Mount Cross. Pastor Julie seems to hold a special place in his heart, though.
"Pastor Julie makes me reach for the better part of my being and leads us to be more loving, more caring, more Christian in every part of our lives," Ken said. "Because of Pastor Julie, when I think of Mount Cross I feel the smile of Christ present everywhere."

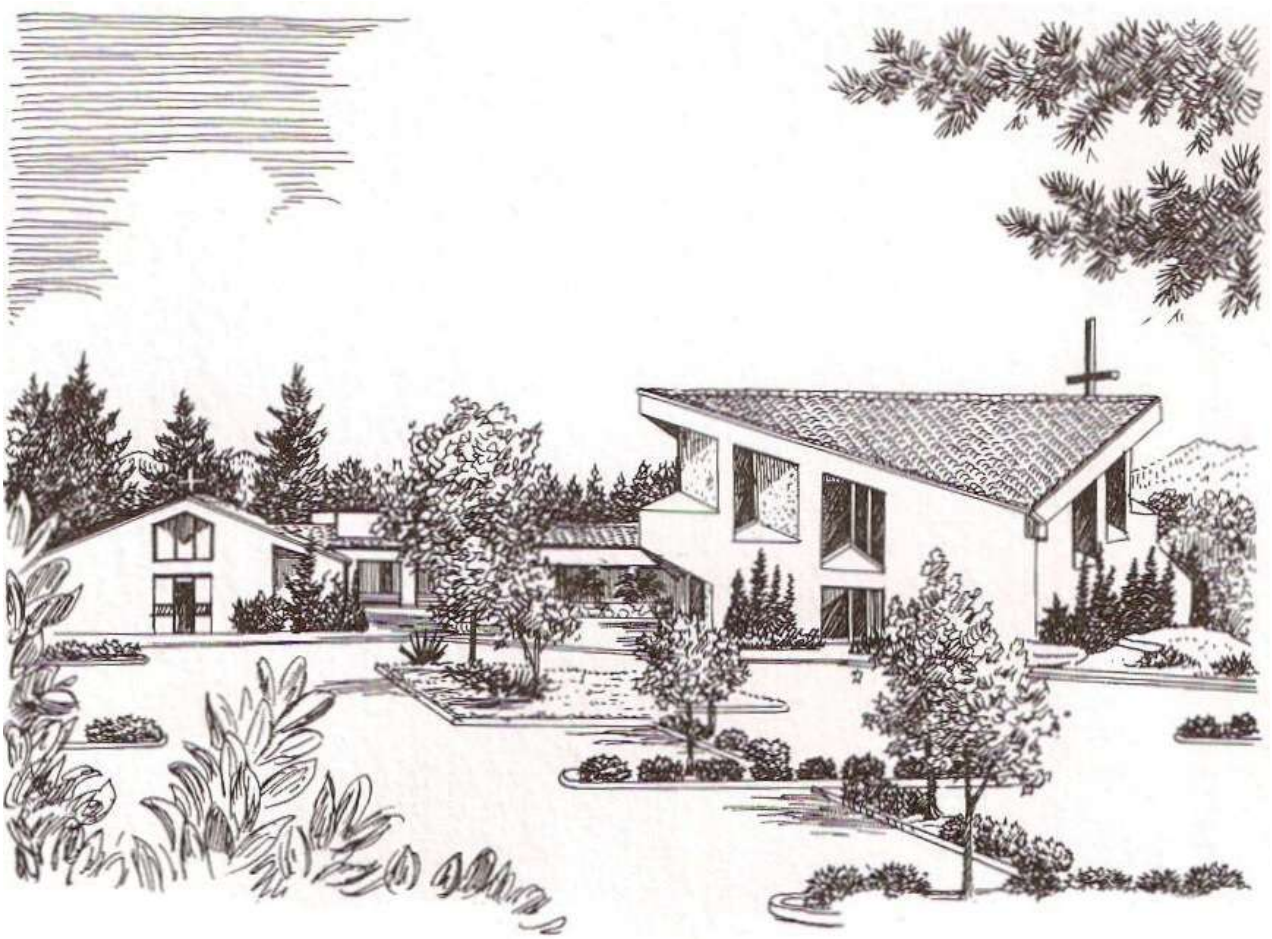
Tracy and Craig Blois have attended Mount Cross since 2009. Their two children, Kylan (13) and Rynn (10), have been raised in the church. Tracy mentioned how meaningful it was for Kylan and Rynn to have a daily Zoom call with Joe Zimmerly and other youth from the church during the early days of COVID.

"They looked forward to that, and it gave them a sense of community and routine and support," Tracy said.

She said that she and Craig were attracted to the church by the friendly welcome they received upon their first visit. She also appreciated "the progressiveness of the ELCA and how much Mount Cross engages with service and justice needs, the children's message, and presence of families."

The entire Blois clan helps the church and community in a variety of ways. Tracy singles out her role in putting on Make, Bake, Celebrate events as especially rewarding. It's all a labor of love, Tracy would say.

"It's a congregation full of love, full of caring, full of concern, and always willing to reach out with a helpful hand," Tracy said. "It's a most blessed place to worship and share."

Looking to the Future

As we close out our 60th anniversary celebrations, we remain grateful for the abundant blessings and grace that God has shown Mount Cross and look forward to joyfully witnessing and serving for the next 60 years!