

# St. Phoebe ministry group lifts up service in college town

written by Alesia Schaefer |



Every parish is challenged with bringing together groups of individuals of varying ages and cultures to worship and serve. This can be especially true for a parish on a college campus at the service of students, young families and longtime parishioners all coming together to worship.

At St. Thomas Aquinas University Parish, on the University of Arkansas campus, one women's group is working to find ways to serve the students and the surrounding parish community they call home.

The St. Phoebe ministry group — 11 women strong — began as a grassroots parish organization in 2022 to serve the students. With the goal of creating and organizing events, liturgies and programs, members aim to fill in the gaps and provide services to the community.

Following the synodal process set forth by Pope Francis, they also see their ministry as an example of how parishioners can accompany and work with the clergy and staff to discern God's will.

"We saw there were more and more non-students attending our church; returning alumni, graduate and international students, faculty and staff of the university were all a part of the growing population at St. Thomas," said Anne Marie Candido, co-chair of the St. Phoebe

service organization.

Named after St. Phoebe, widely recognized as the first woman deacon and a generous contributor to St. Paul's ministry, the organization seeks to follow in her footsteps and honor her.

Founding member Margot Martin gave a substantial gift that kickstarted the group's charitable giving. The Margot Martin Endowment Account helps with initiatives that foster or reflect inclusivity. Martin especially wanted to help students and parishioners in the margins and to help those who cannot help themselves.

Through her endowment, large donations have been made to Canopy, an organization that supports refugee resettlement in northwest Arkansas, the M&N Augustine Foundation and 7 Hills Homeless Day Shelter.

Kim Jones, acting co-chair, remembers when her dad was on UA faculty in the 1970s, the parish was a family parish.

"I was married at the parish in 1987," she said, "I raised my family in Bentonville, then moved to Springdale to go to work at the University of Arkansas campus and decided to make St. Thomas my home parish again."

Jones said the St. Phoebe ministry tries not to overlap with other ministries. She said the group operates with the questions, "How am I called to live out my faith in this place that God put me?" and "How can we best serve the students and live out the faith?"

Since 2022, they have implemented regular Meet & Greets and made \$1,000 donations to community organizations such as the Campus Pantry and two Arkansas parishes in need. They have also offered a fall discussion series on Catholic Social Justice teachings and Bible studies and donated children's books, rosaries and a medical kit for the Masses.

They also offered financial support to female students who want to attend discernment retreats and for students going on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic this summer.

Since the old St. Thomas Aquinas church was razed and Mass and parish activities were relocated to the Student Union Theatre, the group helps with setting up the altar and serving as sacristans, lectors, ushers and greeters.

Candido said the St. Phoebe group is also doing what they can with the newly constructed church by pledging \$5,000 for a stained glass window of St. Catherine of Siena, a doctor of the Church.

"In the old church," she said, "there were no windows depicting women of the Church, and we wanted to be able to make this contribution."

Pastor Father Jason Sharbaugh said he is thankful for the St. Phoebe group.

"The parish is unique in that it is specific to campus ministry focused on what is such an important time in student's lives away from home and also decision-making in life. To have a stable parish group provide examples is part of reciprocal grace," he said.