

Deacon Papini retires after 25 years on campuses

written by Aprille Hanson Spivey |



CONWAY — With a broad smile, firm handshake and an unwavering zeal for the faith, Deacon Richard Papini has welcomed college students to Catholic Campus Ministry in Conway for 25 years.

It was something he couldn't imagine back in 1999 when then-diocesan campus ministry director Phyllis Enderlin suggested he take the helm of the new ministry.

"I said, 'Well, Phyllis, I appreciate you thinking about me, but I don't know anything about campus ministry.' And then she said, 'Deacon Richard, that's OK. You're a deacon, and we need somebody in that position who can speak for the Catholic Church.' Well, I tell everybody this story, I said I almost fell out of my chair — me a deacon, spokesperson for the Catholic Church," he said with a laugh.

After saying yes, the first student he met told him she'd been praying for God to send someone to the ministry.

"It confirmed, you know, that God is who put me there, even if it was the answer to one prayer, one person's prayer," he said.

On July 7, Papini, 80, was again open to the movement of the Holy Spirit toward a new season of life, retiring as director of CCM. Tachia Awbrey, campus minister since last year, was named

the new director.

“Mixed feelings,” Papini told *Arkansas Catholic* July 5 about his retirement. “This has been very much a major part of my life. Andrea, my wife, played a significant role in this thing from the very beginning.”

Papini’s cheerful nature, coupled with his passion for the faith, has been the stability CCM needed to minister throughout the Conway colleges — University of Central Arkansas, Hendrix College and Central Baptist College, and regionally.

With the help of campus ministers, he spearheaded weekly Masses, small Bible study groups, retreats and weekly meals for students, along with his wife. He was a driving force for a \$3.9 million facility and chapel across from UCA at 1919 South Blvd., replacing the small white house where students met for years. Bishop Anthony B. Taylor celebrated the first Mass in the new CCM facility Sept. 6.

But none of this would have been possible if God had not allowed certain pieces to fall into place. Papini, ordained a deacon May 31, 1998, said Andrea was “very much against” him taking the CCM job a little over a year after his ordination. Andrea said the couple had lived in Russellville for about 18 years, and uprooting their lives seemed impossible.

However, the more he learned about the job, the more he felt called, and Andrea said she felt God was telling her to “let go of it.” She agreed he could take on this ministry if the diocese offered him the job before the deadline to accept a voluntary severance package from his then-employer, Entergy. The call came the day before Papini had to take the severance. He commuted for two years from Russellville before moving to Conway.

“It’s meant everything to his life; I mean everything. It has just been life-changing,” Andrea said. “The students had so many problems and issues going on in their lives; they just need someone they can talk to.”

Throughout his ministry, Papini said he’s learned that one of the simplest ways to keep Catholic students grounded is for CCM to be a welcoming place.

“One of the things is welcoming them if they walk through that door. And initially, we weren’t very good at welcoming,” he said, adding they had to combat cliques within the ministry. “... It was a slow process of winning them over. Now that we have this beautiful facility, I think that it will help to attract them in here, especially a Sunday Mass and feeding them after that Mass.”

That welcoming environment allowed students to carve out their life paths with faith, with some leading to the priesthood. Fathers Taryn Whittington, William Burmester and Omar Galván all attended CCM, along with seminarians Deacon Joel Brackett and Duwan Booker.

Father Galván, administrator of St. Andrew Church in Danville and St. Augustine Church in Dardanelle, was drawn to the ministry by pancakes — a CCM meal offered during the stress of finals for the 2010 fall semester.

“He gave me a big smile and a really firm handshake and said, ‘What is your name? I haven’t seen you around,’” Father Galván said of Papini. “We talked, and he kind of invited me to come back next semester.”

He was active in CCM that spring and left for college in Fort Smith the next year. Then he entered the seminary.

“It was the invitation from Deacon Papini that gave me a place to really keep growing my faith and discern properly my vocation to the priesthood,” Father Galván said. “... That small act of going out and simply inviting the college students to be a part of CCM, to be a part of the space to get to know the Lord, that’s what I really admired about him.”

Papini, who will continue with his diaconate ministry at St. Joseph Church in Conway, said his message for college students is the same as it’s always been — grow in the Catholic faith.

“Being a Catholic is a lifetime of learning. That’s one of the things I share with a lot of Catholics. When I’m expressing my feelings about my Catholic faith, it’s a lifetime. You’re constantly learning and growing. But you’ve got to make that choice that you want to grow,” he said. “... The other thing I say ... a lot about is how the Eucharist has impacted my life and it truly is life-giving. And when Jesus says, ‘Unless you eat my body and drink my blood, you have no life in you,’ well, I’ve experienced that life.”



Deacon Richard Papini (center) celebrates the dedication of the new Catholic campus ministry building in Conway Sept. 6, 2023, with new campus ministry director Tachia Awbrey (left) and assistant campus minister Luke Hoelzeman. (Katie Zakrzewski)

New campus ministers help students grow in their faith

written by Katie Zakrzewski |





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marriage of her passion for student success and her love of the Catholic faith.



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Russellville

Jacob Moellers, campus minister

A Morrilton native, Jacob Moellers said attending Mass with his family at Sacred Heart Church felt like clockwork — until his sophomore year of high school when he attended the Search #140 youth retreat.

“That’s when I realized ‘Oh, that’s what this is all about,’” Moellers said.

For the remainder of high school, Moellers became deeply involved in his Catholic faith and very active in Search retreats. In 2018, Moellers began attending Arkansas Tech University in Russellville and was active at St. Leo the Great University Parish. Moellers began helping with the program ACTS Jr. on campus, which brings youth with disabilities together to create a play each semester. Moellers, whose older brother is autistic, has spent much of his personal life debunking stigmas about autism and neurodivergent people.

Moellers began to spend his Mondays among the staff and with the late Father Ernie Hardesty at St. Leo and solidified his role as “the super mega Catholic guy” to his friends.

The new campus ministry center at St. Leo was completed in May 2021, and Moellers found himself donating things to the center, such as a ping pong table.

After graduating in 2022 with a degree in cultural and geospatial studies, Moellers spent several months working at a hardware store and the Arkansas Department of Transportation as a traffic safety analyst. Then one day, St. Leo’s parish manager, Mary Corkins, told him they needed a campus minister, and she could think of no one better than Moellers. He was hired July 17.

Now, Moellers mentors Catholic students at Arkansas Tech University, promoting the faith through St. Leo’s social media accounts. He also organizes activity nights, worship nights and outdoor events and coordinates volunteering efforts while still helping with ACTS Jr. Moellers is ambitious in his campus ministry goals.

“Arkansas Tech is going to be a private Catholic university by the time I’m done with it,” he

said with a laugh.

Conway

Tachia Awbrey, campus minister

For campus minister Tachia Awbrey, her new role at Conway Campus Ministry is a perfect marriage of her passion for student success and her love of the Catholic faith. Awbrey worked at UCA for 15 years as an academic advisor and education counselor after receiving her bachelor's and master's degrees from UCA.

"I always knew that I had a passion to work with and guide this age group based on my own personal experience," Awbrey said.

As a first-generation college student, Awbrey struggled to adapt and lost her scholarships.

"I learned the hard way, went back to work, and ended up finishing," Awbrey said.

Determined to make sure that other students didn't have the same experience, Awbrey went into advising to help guide students.

"There's always conversations of, 'Oh, my grades,' and things like that," Awbrey said. "But the conversations started taking a darker turn, at least with this generation. They're very open about their anxieties. ... That really tugged at my heartstrings, because I was also having my own personal faith journey."

Awbrey grew up Protestant, but a decade ago, she began to feel called to the Catholic faith. Just two years ago, Awbrey converted to Catholicism, and her two sons followed suit. She is a parishioner at St. Joseph Church in Conway.

"These two things merged at the same time — my experience in higher education, along with my personal faith journey."

As a campus minister, Awbrey gets to use both.

Awbrey was hired Aug. 1 and hit the ground running. Now that the new CCM facility is built, Awbrey gets to focus on the wellbeing of the students who walk through their doors.

"Everything I've learned from working in higher education is going to help me relate to these students and what they're going through on a week-to-week basis," Awbrey said. "And being able to openly discuss my faith at the same time is exactly the type of conversations I want to have with students."

Luke Hoelzeman, assistant campus minister

Even though he was officially hired in June 2022 as the assistant campus minister, Luke Hoelzeman has been involved with Catholic campus ministry since 2012 when he attended UCA and majored in health promotion. Hoelzeman's girlfriend at the time and now wife,

Colleen, was very involved in campus ministry, which made it easier for Hoelzeman to be involved. During his sophomore year, Deacon Richard Papini, who has overseen campus ministry at UCA for 25 years, hired Kasey Miller as campus minister. Hoelzeman said he and Miller became close friends, and she acted as a spiritual mentor.

“When I left the dorm and started commuting ... I spent all of my time at the old CCM house on Bruce Street, which means I saw Kasey and Deacon almost every day,” Hoelzeman said.

Miller often hinted to Hoelzeman he should work in campus ministry some day.

“At the time, I was very set on what my role in life was supposed to be,” Hoelzeman said. “I was studying to be an educator and a football coach.”

Hoelzeman did just that for the next few years after graduating in 2017, getting married and settling down in Russellville. Until, one day, he got a call from Miller.

“Kasey reached out to me and said, ‘Hey, we’ve been looking at the budget, and we’re thinking sometime in the next three to five years, we might be able to hire a new campus minister.’ Then she said that she’d be head hunting for me,” Hoelzeman said with a laugh.

But just a few months later, Miller called back — she needed an assistant campus minister urgently. Six months later in the summer of 2022, Hoelzeman found himself working as the assistant campus minister in Conway. Hoelzeman, a parishioner of Sacred Heart Church in Morrilton, primarily helps students at UCA and the University of Arkansas Community College at Morrilton but is eager to help any Catholic student in the area.

It was at Sacred Heart Church that Hoelzeman grew up knowing Moellers. Hoelzeman had coached Moellers for a while and was able to offer the same mentor-mentee faith relationship Miller had offered him.

“If you’re around the age of college ... we encourage you to get involved with us, because we know that it can be a difficult transition after college,” Hoelzeman said. “We’ve all made really good friendships from this, and this is something that I’ve always been really passionate about.”

Jonesboro

While there is still an opening for a campus minister at St. John Newman University Parish at Arkansas State University in Jonesboro, new administrator Father Alex Smith is eager to start making a difference right away. For Father Smith, this is a ministry of presence.

“It’s so important because there’s a lot of Baptist, Methodist and non-denominational campus ministries that are very present on campus,” Father Smith said. “That’s not to judge or chastise — it’s wonderful that our brothers and sisters are there to walk with people. But it’s important that we do our very best to do that too.”

Father Smith has been promoting Catholic campus ministry to students, redesigning the campus ministry website and social media and is putting together a Bible study. He said the administration has been very welcoming, allowing him to be on the sidelines at home football

games and celebrating Mass for the Red Wolves coach and team.

Father Smith said this ministry of presence is especially crucial as students look for something familiar.

“We have an opportunity to cheer them on and to remind them that they’re a young adult on fire for the Lord,” Father Smith said, emphasizing a college campus ministry has to help students navigate their faith and adulthood.

Father Smith hopes a full-time campus minister will help him reach his ministry goals.

“Being a campus minister is not a 9-to-5 mentality,” Father Smith said. “You have to be able to walk with them where they’re at, with God’s grace and mercy as well.”

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