

ACU Campus Ministry ‘goes online’ to serve the community

With most students and staff now working off campus due to the COVID-19 pandemic, the Australian Catholic University (ACU) North Sydney and Strathfield Campus Ministry Teams have gone online with a range of initiatives to care for the pastoral needs and spiritual wellbeing of the ACU community.

The launch of these activities has coincided with the unveiling of ACU Campus Ministry’s microsite <https://campusministry.acu.edu.au> a dedicated resource for ACU students and staff. ACU’s Vice President, Father Anthony Casamento csma, who launched the site said that the new ‘virtual presence’ of ACU Campus Ministry “means that Campus Ministry staff can provide on-going pastoral care for the ACU community even when staff and students are not on campus”.

ACU Campus Ministry Manager, Brother Michael Callinan fms is predicting that “this new one-stop shop will not only provide accurate and seamless touchpoints but will in fact draw in a significant number of students and staff who’ve never before explicitly engaged with Campus Ministry and its myriad offerings.” He also reported significant interest from other chaplaincies about this publicly visible initiative.

Both the ACU North Sydney and Strathfield Campus Ministry Teams have mobilised to support the university’s students and staff across Sydney and beyond through a range of online activities and programs.

Online activities for staff have included silent meditations; individual pastoral conversations and referral to other professionals, staff virtual tea/coffee breaks; national staff afternoon teas; ‘Stitches and Stories’; and Easter Reflection groups.

Online activities for students have included the first ‘Encounter Live’ event, which saw more than 80 young people from all ACU Campuses across Australia join in for online social games, a reflection on the theme of renewal and prayer time and reflection, including Adoration of the Blessed Sacrament. The Encounter Live event was livestreamed on ACU’s Campus Ministry Facebook page which reaches an audience of over 3000 people. Encounter Live was an empowering experience and a fantastic opportunity for students to reconnect with each other and to live virtually the Catholic faith with students on other campuses.

Other programs have included connect groups (faith discussion at varying levels); casual conversations around wellbeing and resilience; mentoring and team development of student evangelising teams; ‘Ask a priest’ – an opportunity to have one of ACU’s campus chaplains answer questions about faith and life; virtual lunches; ‘Sister Sessions and Bros Brunch’ – times for young men and women to gather separately and explore Christian topics that support healthy, holistic living; study sessions with like-minded students, interspersed with faith chat; Live Worship events; and online games and other fun/mindless connection points to help with breaks from study.

ACU North Sydney Campus Pastoral Associate for Staff, Dr Cristina Gomez, said, “The staff are appreciating that the university shows care for their wellbeing during difficult circumstances via the opportunities made available through Campus Ministry. The staff themselves have shown great resilience, creativity, and generosity during such challenging times.”

ACU North Sydney Campus Pastoral Associate for Students, John Nguyen, said, “Translating our physical and in person events such as connect groups, Bros Brunches and Sister Sessions online has been beneficial as students have found it a great way to keep in touch with their friends well as meet those that are beyond their initial circles. It’s been a beautiful experience seeing students being open with each other and their willingness to not let the self-isolation get the best of them by joining us in the virtual spaces we provide.”

FX Mission team member Jerico Nieves said, “Our team has been working to engage with the students online and one of the ways we’ve been doing this is through creating inspiring and uplifting phone backgrounds for the ACU community to use! We have also been developing faith study programs for students to really ask the bigger questions in life and to engage with the Catholic faith. We have also been doing tons of online promotions which include fun graphics and light-hearted videos. Lastly, we have been working on and developing an online retreat series called Encounter Live which will unite all of the national campuses and allow for students to discover the Catholic faith together.”

ACU Strathfield Campus Pastoral Associate for Staff, Ann O’Connor, said, “Being able to use technology to connect community and find ways they can support each other has been a blessing. A staff member commented on these

opportunities: ‘having a chance to bring us together and give us a chance to reflect both personally and professionally on this profoundly unsettling time is so helpful. I think that in a time of crisis such as this, we can catch more than a glimpse of God at work through the presence of Campus Ministry.’”

ACU Strathfield Campus Pastoral Associate for Students, Jean-Claude Attieh, said, “The shift to an online space has inspired a new ‘mission’ as ‘cyber-apostles or digital disciples’. The faith was always meant to be spread to all corners of the world ‘by word or writing’ (2 Thes 2:15). I guess today, more than ever, this new ACU platform is needed. We are knitting a larger thread in the fisherman’s net... the ‘interNET’?”

However, the Campus Ministry Team is seen as ‘essential staff’ by the university, which means they will maintain a presence on both campuses to support students and staff that need to attend campus throughout the COVID-19 crisis while also providing online connection.

ACU Associate Director of Identity & Mission, Mark Lysaght said, “Our role as I see it is to provide distraction in the distraction. The spirit of the age is busyness and driven-ness and we don’t want to replicate that to an online environment. What we want to make sure is that we are reminded of the saving and loving grace of God in a moment such as this. It is what makes us ACU, it is our defining characteristic, that God is present in every moment whether that be faith, reason or COVID.”

Interviews and images of Campus Ministry staff are available on request.

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