

SEEK22 regional event draws 1,000 students to be near God and one another

KNOXVILLE, Tenn. (CNS) – “Draw near to God and he will draw near to you.”

College students traveled to Knoxville to do just that for SEEK22 Feb. 4-6. It was the annual winter conference hosted by the Fellowship of Catholic University Students, a collegiate outreach with missionaries on numerous college and university campuses.

FOCUS missionaries “share the hope and joy of the Gospel” with students on campuses in the U.S. and around the world.

The organization has adapted SEEK the past two years due to the coronavirus pandemic. While usually the in-person conference is hosted in one central location for participants to travel to, recent years have seen a hybrid event of local, smaller gatherings that feature livestreamed talks.

John Zimmer, vice president of apostolic development for FOCUS, was in Knoxville to give a live talk and commented on the atmosphere of the regional gathering.

“It is amazing. This experience of the kind of smaller, regional conferences is really just a microcosm of what we do on a grand scale,” Zimmer said. “The conferences always have a role of helping people fall more in love with Jesus Christ and then recognizing that they’re called to mission.”

Students, families and parish leaders gathered at campuses, homes or parishes all around the country, including Dallas; Miami; Orange, California; and Kansas City, Missouri. Nationally, nearly 12,000 students gathered at campuses for

the SEEK experience.

Internationally, groups met in countries such as Ireland, England, Austria and Mexico.

The regional event held at the Knoxville Convention Center hosted 15 campuses from five states, including Tennessee, Alabama, Kentucky, Ohio and Illinois.

Drawing a total crowd of 1,100 that included missionaries, benefactors and mission partners, more than 90% of the attendees were college students.

In addition to his current role, Zimmer has previously served as a campus missionary and overseen the training and formation of missionary staff.

“What we exist to do, really, is to evangelize college students, yes, but then to launch them so they can go back to wherever they are, whether that’s their college campus, whether that’s their neighborhood, and when they leave college to bring it into their workplaces, anywhere they go, their parish,” he said.

“Part of what has always been at the heart of the conferences is that this isn’t about FOCUS. This is about Jesus Christ and the Great Commission,” Zimmer explained. “What we’re trying to do is bring the light of Christ and the enthusiasm of young people to the world.”

The atmosphere of a SEEK conference is energetic, alive and full of emotion. Throughout the weekend, college students mentor and counsel one another. Some run about waving their school flag with pride.

Some students leave the room crying, while others lift their hands in worship as praise-filled music fills the air. Still others can be heard through the hallways saying, “I love these people. I love being Catholic.”

Since the regional conference in Knoxville was held adjacent to the University of Tennessee, that meant there was a large showing of students clad in bright orange.

Thomas Gardiner, a senior at the university, said it was his first time attending a SEEK conference.

"I kind of started taking my faith seriously more in college," Gardiner told The East Tennessee Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Knoxville. "Everyone talked about how great SEEK was for them, and actually I work with one of the missionaries.

"He would always talk about how he found Christ through SEEK, and that's what initiated him to start looking more and led him to FOCUS and to start and kind of lead us in our men's group."

University of Tennessee sophomore Helen McCall returned to SEEK for a second time because of the fun she had last year at a local gathering with students from the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga.

"I think just seeing so many different people my same age from across mainly the South come together to learn more about our faith and learn more about each other has been really great," she said.

As a member of FOCUS Greek, an outreach of within FOCUS to students in fraternities and sororities, McCall said she has enjoyed the opportunity to meet other young women from different sororities through a Bible study with her missionary team director.

"That was one of the first ways that I made friends at Tennessee, was through that Bible study," she said. "I already knew some girls in my own sorority, but then getting to meet different girls across different chapters and relate to them about faith has been really nice."

Also present for the weekend was Paulist Father Richard Whitney, associate pastor at St. John XXIII University Parish on the University of Tennessee campus.

He said his main role on campus is to provide “spiritual accompaniment as people are trying to find out what it means to be a Catholic in (their) adult life.”

“How do I live my faith as an adult Catholic? I can help them do that because I had to do the same thing,” Father Whitney said. “I would say the biggest question is, what am I supposed to be feeling? Why am I doing this when nothing is happening? And the realization that something will happen. ... Having an active faith life allows us to cope and manage just so much better.”

FOCUS missionaries are active on the University of Tennessee campuses in Knoxville and Chattanooga.

“FOCUS (missionaries) are four extra people on the ministerial staff that can go out and show that there is joy in living our Catholic lives as adults,” Father Whitney said.

“And there’s only so far the priests on staff can go,” he added. “But the FOCUS missionaries are more peers, and they have a very happy engagement and are just another way to reach out and share the reflected love that God gives all of us.”

Nolan is a multimedia reporter at The East Tennessee Catholic, newspaper of the Diocese of Knoxville.