

A New Nashotah House Feature:

Our Alumni

& their Lives of Service

The fundamental principles of Nashotah House include the Benedictine way of spirituality which, at its very core, promotes concern for community and the cultivation of charity. As a result, many of the diverse ministries our alumni gravitate toward are both inspirational and thought-provoking.

These are remarkable insights into the people, their programs and our culture. In that light, Nashotah House will be showcasing the impact of our alumni on communities, the Church and the world by featuring a story of one of our own every month.

Our first featured alumna is The Very Reverend Sarah Bronos. Reverend Bronos is the rector of the Church of the Good Shepherd in Maitland, Florida. She is also the dean of the Central Deanery, serves as a member of the Diocesan Board and devotes time as a Nashotah House Alumni Council member.

There is much that could be shared about Reverend Bronos, but her most recent mission to improve the lives of others by supporting and enabling the creation of a home for a new Christian school for special-needs children, the Celandine Life Preparatory Academy, is particularly noteworthy and needs to be shared.



The Very Reverend Sarah Bronos

This was not an easy project, yet seven years ago she believed the Lord led her to an idea about a new use for the church property that would benefit those outside its community. Here is her story.

Good Shepherd in Maitland Now Houses the Celandine Life Preparatory Academy

The Very Rev. Sarah Bronos

The Episcopal Church of the Good Shepherd in Maitland, Florida sits on a beautiful piece of property with green space, shade trees, a chapel, church, parish hall, and a campus with four other buildings.

Nearly seven years ago, during my interview, I commented that I truly believed that the Lord purposed something for the property that would benefit those outside the church community. I also said that the theme of education kept coming to the fore in my prayer time.



A couple of years later, I met Gale, who handed me a book written by her daughter and granddaughter. She said, "I just had to come and give you this." The title of the book is *I Am in Here: The Journey of a Child with Autism Who Cannot Speak but Finds Her Voice*. It changed the focus of my prayers from education in general to Christian education for special-needs children. It is a powerful book that contains wonderful poetry written by a nonverbal autistic child. Here is one poem:

Me

***I sometimes fear
That people cannot understand
That I hear
And I know
That they don't believe I go
To every extreme
To try to express
My need to talk.
If only they could walk
In my shoes
They would share my news:
I am in here
And trying to speak every day
In some kind of way.***

Elizabeth Bonker, age 9

When I explored the possibility of a Christian school for special-needs children on our campus, many parishioners were supportive, but there was not enough interest to even start a feasibility study. But, I kept it in my prayers. Sometime later, a visitor asked about renting space for a special-needs school. However, she was not interested in a relationship between the church and the school or in having a chapel service for the children, something for which I had been praying.

Last March, a woman drove onto the campus asking if we had space to rent to a Christian not-for-profit school for special-needs children. She was the mother of one of the students and said that she "had been looking at other buildings and I drove by on the way home and just felt compelled to come in and ask." Shortly thereafter, I received a call that the school wasn't interested after all. Since this had seemed so right, that evening, I prayed, "Lord, if this is of you, then close every other door that they try and walk through and bring them here."

A month later, I received another call asking if I would still be willing to meet. It seemed that nothing they had looked at was right.

Interestingly, a few months earlier, we had been short-staffed, and I asked for volunteers to help out in the office. One of my parishioners, Mark, who had taken early retirement as a school superintendent from New York state, answered our call. He was working on some projects for us when Kristen and Margarita (the school owner and administrator) arrived for the meeting. I asked Mark to sit in.

I said up front: "I am not interested in a straight rental situation. What I would love is a relationship between the school and the parish family." It was a Holy-Spirit filled moment; we all felt this relationship was of the Lord. It also became very clear during the conversation that I didn't speak "school," especially not "special-needs school." But, Mark did. I asked him to take the lead on the discussions as we moved forward.





I shared our conversation with the vestry, and they were 100 percent in agreement to move ahead. A memorandum of understanding was developed that provided the basis of the lease agreement. The vestry approved both, and then Kristen stepped out in faith. In order to lease the buildings, the school would need to request permission from the City of Maitland for a zoning change.

The date set for final approval was the first day of school. There were, of course, a huge number of hurdles ahead: an updated property boundary survey along with ADA compliance issues including a concrete walkway, a railing, and the installation of a fire alarm system.

This was an expensive project, and we again stepped out in faith. The congregation was extraordinarily generous. While we were able to make the down payment for the fire alarm installation, and work began, we still needed money to pay the balance when the work was finished. And, we still needed a lot more money to cover everything required for zoning approval. One parishioner, Scott, volunteered to write a grant application in spite of the fact the deadline was close.

And God provided through the Congregation Development Commission Grant, an award of \$25,000!

Meanwhile, we also had to clear out the two buildings to be leased, which included moving our children's nursery and Godly Play room into a different building. Many faithful parishioners helped. Kristen also needed to remodel the two buildings. It was a very busy summer for many people. We prayed through each portion of

the zoning process, and even though one zoning board member was quite vocal against the change of use, the city council voted unanimously to grant it. Celandine Life Preparatory Academy opened its doors on our campus with 38 beautiful children, ages 7-21.



Because the program for the older children includes life-preparation skills, they are taught how to clean by cleaning rooms on the campus. They set the tables on Fridays for our Sunday morning breakfast, and they have also cleared out and replanted our two community garden planters and have planted another two.

In our earlier conversations, the school representatives asked if I would be willing to have a weekly children's chapel – another answer to prayer! It is such a blessing to see children moving from one building to another during the day, to train as acolytes and ushers (especially when their parents never thought this was a possibility), to share the love of Christ with them, and to have parents say to us about the chapel service: "This is so wonderful for the kids – I don't even have words to describe how good it is for them."

Another parent wrote to thank us: "I have been meaning to send this to all of you and your staff. My husband and I would like to thank you for giving Celandine Life Prep Academy the opportunity to have the school at your location. It is a wonderful school with wonderful people. My son, Ryan, loves this school and all the staff. This is the first time he has ever said that he wants to go back to school.



He misses his friends and the teachers. This is a big deal. Ryan feels so safe and welcomed with the staff at Celandine. They truly understand him and his needs. Before Celandine, it was very stressful, heartbreaking to see no clear path for our son, but at Celandine, I see great things and I am very happy and proud to be a part of this community. And thank you from the bottom of our hearts for having us be part of your community. I see wonderful changes now and for the future for these children and their families. Thank you so much."

When God purposes and we wait on him in prayer and step out in faith, a two-way blessing always unfolds.