

Q&A: Washington Bishop Mariann Budde says church should 'lead with Jesus' in its nonpartisan advocacy

 episcopalnewsservice.org/2021/02/04/qa-washington-bishop-mariann-budde-says-churchs-nonpartisan-advocacy-should-lead-with-jesus/

February 4, 2021



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Posted 1 hour ago



Washington Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde recites prayers at the first Way of the Cross station March 21, 2013, in Lafayette Square in Washington, D.C. Budde, joined by Connecticut Bishop Suffragan James Curry, left, and Connecticut Bishop Ian Douglas, was part of a procession against violence months after the massacre of students and teachers at Sandy Hook Elementary School in Newtown, Connecticut. Photo: Mary Frances Schjonberg/Episcopal News Service

[Episcopal News Service] Many Episcopal bishops, priests and deacons feel called by faith to bear public witness on issues of the day, but few have been as prominent or outspoken in recent years as Diocese of Washington Bishop Mariann Budde. As the top Episcopal leader in the nation's capital, Budde hasn't been shy in calling for federal policies that reflect Jesus' call to care "for the least of these."

Budde, in an interview with Episcopal News Service, said she has tried to "lead with Jesus" rather than let politics guide her ordained ministry, going back to her 18 years as a parish priest in Minneapolis, Minnesota. "If your Jesus always agrees with your politics, you're probably not reading deeply enough into Jesus," she said. At the same time, "I don't think justice and societal issues are optional for clergy. I think it's kind of embedded in our faith."

Since her consecration as Washington bishop in 2011, she said she has tried to focus on her primary role as chief pastor to the diocese's Episcopalians, and when engaging in advocacy, church leaders should "take a moral position and not a partisan position, to start somewhere we have authority."

Budde and other church leaders also are responding to calls for healing after the recent presidential campaign and its tense aftermath. ENS spoke with Budde on Jan. 13, one week after a deadly riot at the U.S. Capitol by supporters of then-President Donald Trump and a week before the inauguration of President Joe Biden.

The following questions and answers have been condensed and lightly edited for length and clarity.

ENS: The Diocese of Washington is like any other diocese in that it covers a geographic area and encompasses a number of congregations and members, but it also is home to the seat of the U.S. government. Does that shape how you see your role as bishop of the diocese?



The Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde was consecrated as bishop of the Diocese of Washington in 2011. Photo: Washington National Cathedral

BUDDE: The Diocese of Washington goes all the way down to southern Maryland. I wish it had a different name, actually – “The Diocese of Washington and Four Maryland Counties.” I mean, there are a lot of people whose profession is government in one form or another, and not just the political, elected side but the civil service side. The temptation is greater to focus on what’s happening on the federal side of the government, and that’s something that I’ve tried not to define my episcopate [by]. I’m not a chaplain to the government, I’m the pastor of pastors and a leader of congregations. I tend to pick my issues carefully.

ENS: If you look back at the examples of bishops before you, several of them also spoke out on issues of their time. I'm thinking of Bishops John Walker in the late 1970s and 1980s and John Chane in the 2000s.

BUDDE: Bishop Walker is a real model for me and not simply his moral courage and his social justice leadership, which was iconic, but it was in the context of a very broad ministry. He loved children, he loved parish priests, he loved congregations. He was a man of tremendous grace, so I looked to him quite a bit. I think of him more than anyone, in terms of who has occupied this office.

ENS: It seems like Chane, your most recent predecessor, might have had a different approach?

BUDDE: This is no disrespect to Bishop Chane, because he had a phenomenal ministry, particularly on the world stage and in the Middle East and issues of Middle East peace, tremendous influence and importance – but I dare say that one of the reasons I was elected was I was not John Chane. It was a real pendulum swing for the diocese in the sense that they wanted somebody whose primary commitment was congregational life and vitality, and that the bishop was going to spend the majority of her time working to revitalize congregations. And that was my commitment to them. That's what my passion, my sense of call, was.

ENS: Do you still feel that today?

BUDDE: I do. And I feel that the public witness is only as strong as we are strong. It doesn't really matter how articulate a bishop is if she doesn't have behind her strong, vibrant congregations who are making a difference in their communities and who can mobilize for the benefit of their neighborhoods and towns. And I also think the witness is stronger if there's more than one voice.

ENS: Do you provide any guidance to clergy in the diocese about how to approach political issues and when it is or isn't appropriate to speak out from the pulpit or in public?

BUDDE: In the context of our orientation for clergy new to the diocese and those newly ordained, I discuss the spiritual practice and vocation of preaching, and stewardship of the pulpit. In that context I share my approach and philosophy about speaking into politics and other topics of social concern, but that is only one dimension of preaching that I discuss. Stewardship of the pulpit is essential for good pastoral leadership.

ENS: Is there an expectation for the bishop of Washington to speak out a little bit more? That U.S. politics is part of your mission field?

BUDDE: Yep, happens all the time. And sometimes I answer to that and sometimes I take a pass. And I try to do it based on the issues that the constituency I serve has some real expertise or experience with, or issues that are absolutely representative of who they are. Issues of racial justice, for example, are embedded in the life of this diocese, so if I were not committed to that, I'd be the wrong bishop. Immigration reform is an issue that affects not only the moral fabric of our country but the lives of people who are in our congregations.

The Rt. Rev. Mariann Budde, bishop of Washington, raises her hand in prayer outside St. John's Episcopal Church in Washington, D.C., on June 14, 2020. Photo: Jack Jenkins/RNS

ENS: Certainly, there is a risk that Episcopal leaders may be seen as being too political. People use the term "political," but what I think they mean is "partisan." A lot of the policy positions that the church has taken seem to be aligned with Democratic positions. I suppose you can't be blamed for which party takes which position, but you must think about that. How do you respond?

BUDDE: I think it's a fair critique; let me just say that. Some leadership of The Episcopal Church, we tend to be more Matthew 25 Christians. We tend to be ones who talk about how we treat our fellow human beings and how we care for the poor and how we clothe the naked – all of those things that Jesus talks about in Matthew 25, as opposed to John 3:16 Christians, "for God so loved the world that he gave his only begotten son, to the end that all who believe in him shall not perish, but have eternal life." Those are the two classic definitions of what it means to follow Jesus. My public stance is more in line with the former because it seems to be the more universally compassionate position that aligns itself with the common good. And I am concerned about a very distorted view of Christianity that has the nation's attention, and I do feel some responsibility to say there's more than one way to live a public life as a Christian. I actually spend a lot of my time studying, reading and learning from Christian evangelicals, because many of them are way better than we are on some of the things that build healthy congregations. And I've learned that there's a very broad swath of people and leadership styles and public leadership perspective within the white evangelical world. It's not some big monolithic bloc. But I do reject what we saw on Jan. 6 [at the U.S. Capitol].

ENS: Do you think that faith can be a healing force in this time of extreme polarization? It could be a dividing force, but what are the ways you think that it can be a healing force?

BUDDE: One of the things about religion is it can be all those things. It can be in service to our highest aspirations and to our most base behaviors. Of course religion can be a healing force. It's the strongest of healing forces. One of my colleagues says, "There ought to be space for grace." Religion, at its best, gives a way to talk about how we fail and how we start again and how we can be drawn back from behaviors that we regret and how we can find a place of healing, sometimes not by dealing with the conflict directly but coming at it indirectly. That's

what I see Joe Biden trying to do. I think he's trying to say, "I'm going to do my best to find a way to bring us together according to the things that we really do value as a people." I don't think he's perfect, but I hear him trying to do that and I pray for his success.

ENS: Looking forward, how do you balance the desire to let your faith lead you toward that place of healing and at the same time look back on what has happened and say, "That's not what I think we should be"? Is that in conflict?

BUDDE: It's somewhat in conflict, but I also feel there's a process of reconciliation. You don't just pick yourself up from pummeling someone and then say, "Let's make peace." There are consequences and accountability that do need to take place before we can have kind of a deep reconciliation. And I think that we're learning that with our generational struggle with racial inequity. I feel that in some way we have to allow the people who have been most grievously wounded a chance to heal and to make sure that there's safety and restitution. Healing is a byproduct of work and time. It can't be decreed by a person saying, "It's time for healing." You actually have to work at it.

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