

English priest shadows women bishops for a job she can't have—yet

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WASHINGTON (RNS) The Rev. Sue Pinnington is on a five-week mission to compile a job description for a post she's currently not able to have: bishop.

During a recent stay in the nation's capital, the English priest shadowed Episcopal Bishop Mariann Edgar Budde, the first woman elected as the top leader of the Diocese of Washington. Outside a subway station, the two women imposed ashes on commuters for Ash Wednesday. Two days later, they heard the Dalai Lama at the Washington National Cathedral.

Both women said it was most important for Budde to show Pinnington the “bread and butter work” of a bishop, even though Pinnington's Church of England does not allow women to serve as bishops—at least not yet.

“The Church of England is about to have women bishops in the next 18 months to two years, and we don't have any clear models of how a female bishop might look,” said Pinnington, 47, the leader of St. Michael and All Angels, a parish in Houghton-le-Spring that has existed for more than 1,000 years.

She's watched closely as Budde has visited various churches in the Washington region and incorporated Scripture in her meetings with her staff at the diocesan headquarters.

“She gets people to contribute and she actively builds a sense of community,” Pinnington said of Budde.

The two women talked about the informal mentorship in Budde's spacious office in the shadow of the cathedral, 20 years to the day that the Church of England

ordained its first female priest. This year also marks the 40th anniversary of women's ordination in the Episcopal Church, when the so-called "Philadelphia 11" broke official church rules to become the first female priests in the U.S. church.

That anniversary has been on Budde's mind recently, as she read about the early days when female Episcopal priests sparked concern that they would be a "sexual distraction" with long hair and earrings. She hopes that now Pinnington and others can view her as a leader, not just a woman leader.

"I don't spend very much of my day thinking about being a woman bishop," said Budde, 54. "I'm always a woman and I'm now always a bishop and so I would love for that to be, in time, more normative, and that just takes time and that takes engagement."

She considers it a "travesty" when women are not permitted to be considered for leadership roles.

"To deny women or to exclude women from that leadership pool is denying not only a gender but it's also a whole pool of gifts incarnate in a particular person," Budde said.

In the forthcoming book "Looking Forward, Looking Backward: Forty Years of Women's Ordination," Episcopal Presiding Bishop Katharine Jefferts Schori—the first woman elected to lead a national branch of the global Anglican Communion—cites other ways women clergy benefit the Anglican Communion.

"Women often, but not universally, bring a more collaborative and participative style to their leadership," she wrote. "As a result, many sorts of institutions have shifted away from a rigidly hierarchical, top-down style of leadership."

Since 1989, there have been 20 women bishops in the Episcopal Church, including the late Jane Holmes Dixon, who was elected the suffragan (assistant) bishop in Washington in 1992.

Pinnington chose to spend her sabbatical exploring the roles of women bishops in hopes that she can bring back what she learned to members of the Church of England, from lay people to male bishops, some of whom have expressed interest in her research.

Though she's focusing on how U.S. women bishops do their jobs, she's not certain she'd want the job herself.

"I would be open to any of God's callings, whatever that is," said Pinnington, who has served on the national committee of her church's National Association of Diocesan Advisers in Women's Ministry. "At the moment, I am very happy as the rector of Houghton-le-Spring."

The Church of England's General Synod vote in November 2012 on women bishops did not reach the necessary two-thirds majority for passage. It caused "seismic shocks, not just through the church but through society," she said. British Prime Minister David Cameron called for the church to reconsider its "very sad" decision.

"It was a pretty big slap in the face," she said of the vote.

Watching the vote from her church in northern England, Pinnington texted her then-bishop, Justin Welby, during the debate. Their feelings were mutual: "very disappointed." Welby later became the archbishop of Canterbury, the spiritual leader of both the Church of England and the wider Anglican Communion.

The General Synod voted in February to fast-track a process to vote again on women bishops. A church announcement said if the delegates pass the legislation in July and the British Parliament then approves it, the new rule could become law before the end of this year.

Dissenters, such as the traditionalist group Forward in Faith, remain opposed to women priests and bishops, citing "reasons of theological conviction."

"I trained with people who I regard as very fine priests who are opposed to my ministry and have some friends who are still opposed to women's ministry," Pinnington said. "That is how it is."

Nevertheless, she hopes that her research—she'll return to the U.S. after Easter to visit bishops in California—may help foster future women bishops in her homeland. Before she left for Holy Week services back home, Pinnington attended the Episcopal Church's House of Bishops meeting in Texas.

"It was a delight to meet so many remarkable bishops who are women," she said. "They are carrying out their role with integrity, intelligence and grace. They prove that not only women can be bishops, but are doing so."