



The Rev. Jennifer Butler, center, speaks during a protest against the Republican health care bill outside the office of Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell on Capitol Hill in Washington, D.C., on July 13, 2017. (RNS/Madeleine Buckley)

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Vice President Kamala Harris has hired the Rev. Jen Butler, a Presbyterian minister and well-known liberal religious advocate, as the new head of faith outreach for the Harris-Walz campaign, charging the experienced activist with overseeing efforts to court a range of religious voters.

Butler, whose official title is national faith engagement director, told RNS in an interview on Wednesday (Aug. 28) that while her past work often involved issue-oriented campaigns that allowed her to be a "bridge-builder" between conservative and liberal religious groups, she is excited to support the Democratic presidential campaign.

"I also recognize that we're at a pivotal moment in American democracy where faith voices for justice are needed now more than ever," she said. "The Harris-Walz campaign is a really unique opportunity to shift the debate, to engage all of those who are concerned about what a Trump presidency would mean, the work of this campaign and what it can do to transform America."

She added: "It feels very exciting and full of possibilities."

Butler is a familiar face to a wide spectrum of faith leaders and politicians both inside and outside Washington, with a breadth of contacts and experience that a still-fledgling Harris-Walz campaign can use as it targets a number of faith-fueled voting demographics in its sprint toward Election Day.

"I bring a broad set of relationships that I think can help, very quickly, pull a broad coalition together," Butler said.

Butler began work in 1996 at the United Nations office of her denomination, the Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.). She left in 2005 to help found Faith in Public Life, a faith-focused advocacy effort incubated at the Center for American Progress, a liberal think tank, that was eventually spun off as its own organization in 2008, with Butler as its head.

Under Butler's leadership, Faith in Public Life went on to lead or participate in campaigns in support of a range of causes such as [immigrant rights](#), voting rights, health care reform and LGBTQ rights.



This combination photo shows Vice President Kamala Harris, left, and the Rev. Jennifer Butler. (AP, left. David F. Choy, right)

During the Trump administration, the group was among the White House's most critical faith-based opponents, and Butler was often seen speaking at protest rallies. She was [arrested alongside other clergy](#) on Capitol Hill in 2017 while protesting Republican-led efforts to repeal and replace the Affordable Care Act, whose passage in 2010 Faith in Public Life strongly supported. When Catholic nuns defied the U.S. bishops by voicing support for the bill, Butler and her organization helped ensure that the sisters' message got national coverage, even as she worked to bring liberal leaders into dialogue with the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops, which was critical of the health care proposal.

Under then-President Barack Obama, Butler served as chair of the President's Advisory Council on Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships.

She stepped down as head of FPL in 2022 but has continued her advocacy work, leading a democracy-focused effort known as Faith in Democracy and joining other faith-oriented causes.

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Asked whether the truncated election timeline gave her pause, Butler, who was brought onboard by the campaign two days ago, explained she is accustomed to running campaigns on short notice. She was quick to mention plans to reach voters in Rust Belt swing states — the former "blue wall" states such as Michigan and Wisconsin that Democrats could once count on in national elections but have become swing states.

"Given the 'blue wall' states, the Catholic leaders and Catholic population are very important, so we're moving right away to set up a very high-level Catholic table to engage folks," said Butler.

Members of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints are likely to be an important constituency in the critical swing state of Arizona, where they make up a small but influential piece of the electorate, Butler pointed out. Historically the single most reliably Republican voters of any religious group, the tradition has shown unusual divisions over former President Donald Trump. "They're concerned about religious freedom, and I think we can engage them, because we are the party of freedom," Butler said, echoing the Harris-Walz campaign's "Freedom" campaign theme.

Butler stressed the need to engage with faith sectors of the Democratic base, notably Black Protestants. Harris, a Baptist, [called her pastor, the Rev. Amos Brown](#), shortly after President Joe Biden abandoned his reelection bid.

Butler drew confidence from [grassroots faith-led efforts](#) that sprang up ahead of the Democratic National Convention, such as Christians for Kamala and Evangelicals for Harris, and by the recurring faith [themes at this year's DNC](#), which she attended.

"Democrats, as we saw at the convention, are really willing to lean into their faith voices," she said.

"I've seen a lot of evangelical women coming our way who want us to join in common cause, to support women and families," Butler said. "They're seeing the hypocrisy of the Republican approach — to put women and doctors in jail, to be very punitive. That kind of criminalizing of abortion really actually does not create the conditions for strong family

life."

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Butler argued the campaign has opportunities to reach white evangelical Protestants, a demographic that has shown ironclad support for Trump.

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She pointed to "moral bankruptcy in Trump's positions" and the sense that Southern Baptist leaders have dismissed the sexual abuse crisis in their denomination as opportunities for Harris. "Evangelical women are fed up with that, and they see how that plays out in Trump's leadership."

Butler acknowledged that ongoing strife within the Democratic Party over the Biden White House's support for Israel in the Gaza war will be a challenge. Though at times pointedly critical of Israel's leadership and dedicated to pushing for a cease-fire, Biden has come under fire from [religious groups](#).

Divisions over the issue came to a head during the convention, where advocates for Palestinians failed to persuade the party to allow a Palestinian to speak from the same stage as the parents of a man taken hostage by Hamas. "Muslim Women for Harris-Walz," which had sprung up alongside the Christian support groups, [disbanded in protest](#), a sign that Harris may have inherited Biden's vulnerability in Michigan and other places with substantial Muslim American populations.

"I have some counterparts within the campaign who are doing Jewish voter outreach and Muslim voter outreach," Butler said. "I'll be supporting their work and trying to help them do what they're trying to do to help folks understand that we have an opportunity here to sort of reset how things are done and how important their vote is for saving not only American democracy, but democracy worldwide."

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As for bringing along white Protestants from the so-called mainline denominations — Lutherans, Episcopalians, Methodists and her own Presbyterians, Butler said outreach efforts to evangelicals and members of the liberal Democratic base would necessarily overlap with mainline Christians, whose members often fall into both groups.

"I grew up in the Bible Belt in the mainline Protestant church, and most of the folks around me were kind of knee-jerk Republicans at a time when I was still supporting Jimmy Carter as a young evangelical myself in a Methodist church," she said.

She said the Democrats could also rely on players such as Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, an Episcopalian who is comfortable [speaking about his faith](#) and could play a surrogate role on Christian media.

Her position in the Democratic campaign, she said, is a natural extension of her work as an activist, which is based in her experience growing up in the South. As a young person, Butler said, she "understood Jesus as bringing good news to the poor and the oppressed, but not hearing about that Jesus in my church."

Her political work, she argued, allows her to "address that disconnect" and "as minister, help people hear that voice of a true Christianity that is about freedom for the oppressed."

This story appears in the **Election 2024** feature series. [View the full series.](#)