

Faithless clergy ‘all over the place,’ says embattled United Church minister

Atheist preacher’s supporters join in making her case at hearing Thursday.



Gretta Vosper, right, goes for a hug of one of her supporters, prior to the meeting Thursday with United Church officials. (RICK MADONIK /TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

By [MEGAN DOLSKI](#) Staff Reporter.
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“This story is not about me,” said Gretta Vosper, the self-described atheist and United Church of Canada minister, as she pointed to rows of empty chairs that had just been packed by a small crowd, seemingly all who had been sitting there to support her.

“This story is about that group of people, because clergy who don’t believe are all over the place, they just don’t have a community that allows them to speak honestly about their beliefs.”

At Thursday’s hearing in Toronto, Vosper, members of her congregation — West Hill United — as well as her supporters in the United Church’s Toronto Southeast Presbytery had a chance to respond to a report released last week by a review committee. The committee deemed that Vosper was “[not suitable](#)” to keep her job because she doesn’t believe in God and should be defrocked.

Now, taking into account the feedback given at the hearing at their offices, a United Church Toronto Conference sub-executive committee is deciding what to do about the recommendations that report made — including bringing the matter to a formal hearing to determine if Vosper should be put on a disciplinary “Discontinued Service List.”

But the idea of doing that and the process that has led to addressing this question has drawn criticism from many involved.

An online petition is circulating urging that the report’s recommendations be rejected. It criticizes the report for expressing dissent, failing to consult more broadly and suggests that Vosper and her beliefs be addressed “as a matter for dialogue and not a matter for discipline.”

By Thursday evening, it had more than 750 signatures.

Speaking at the meeting, Randy Bowes, chair of the West Hill United Church board, asked that Vosper be recognized as an effective minister. He presented testimony from churchgoers who felt strongly that she had made a strong and positive impact on their lives.

Bowes says that regardless of the decision that gets made, he hopes that West Hill and Vosper have been able to start a discussion that continues on.

“I hope that the United Church gets stronger from this and that this does not become too divisive and administrative,” he said.

To the surprise of Vosper and her lawyer, the Toronto Southeast Presbytery executive came out in support of the recommendations.

“Part of the reason this seems so weird is that typically when reviewing a minister it is because the minister has been accused of engaging in some kind

of bad behaviour,” said Martha ter Kuile, the past chair of the Toronto Southeast Presbytery.

“That’s never been the question here. . . . We are trying to follow a process that has been specified but this is absolutely a precedent.”

Julian Falconer, Vosper’s lawyer, says the scope of the issue goes far beyond his client. “It’s the essence of the United Church and how big the tent is. That’s not a trial about a person — those are bigger ideas,” he said.

Rev. David Allen, executive secretary of the Toronto Conference, said Thursday’s meeting was respectful, and that what was raised there will influence the discussions and decision expected to follow.

“We believe that the process has been fair all along,” he said. “But we certainly have heard the criticism and so that will be something we will take into the deliberations.”

A decision was expected in the coming days.