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Atheist minister faces Conference review

Rev. Gretta Vosper, minister of West Hill United in Toronto and a self-declared atheist, faces a church trial on her suitability for ministry in The United Church of Canada. *By Mike Milne*

FAITH | July 2015

Toronto Conference began what it calls a review process this past spring. But because Vosper has appealed a ruling on the process, the review, if it moves forward, is unlikely to take place until autumn.

The review was sparked by informal complaints about Vosper's well-publicized declarations of atheism, plus a formal letter to the Conference from the board of downtown Toronto's Metropolitan United, asking for "clarification of the shared values and beliefs of The United Church of Canada" and expressing concerns about "West Hill United's atheistic/post-theistic beliefs."

Reviews are usually based on a minister's effectiveness; suitability for ministry is normally determined by a Conference interview board before ordination, commissioning or admission and rarely, if ever, revisited. So Toronto Conference's Executive voted to ask General Council general secretary Nora Sanders how to deal with concerns about Vosper, "with a focus on continuing affirmation of the questions asked of all candidates at the time of ordination, commissioning or admission."

The first of those three questions is, "Do you believe in God: Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and do you commit yourself anew to God?"

The process suggested by Sanders approves asking Vosper those questions again, linking ministers' suitability for ministry in the United Church with their effectiveness as ministry personnel.

Toronto Conference asked Vosper to respond to the questions in writing by early June and face a five-member commission from Conference's interview board later in the month. Instead of doing that, she appealed the general secretary's ruling. The appeal must be considered by different levels of the General Council's judicial committee before the review sought by the Conference can go ahead.

If Vosper's appeal is denied, Conference could resume its review of her ministry and possibly recommend that she be placed on the church's Discontinued Service List (Disciplinary), which — if confirmed by a formal hearing — would amount to firing her.

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John DiPede · 2 hours ago

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This article mentions a formal letter from Metropolitan United expressing concerns about "West Hill's atheistic/post-theistic beliefs". In 2004 West Hill first outlined its shared values in a document called "Vision Works". It has been revisited and revised twice over the past 11 years. Contrary to what Metropolitan UC suggests, the most recent version clearly articulates: "With roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we embrace theists, agnostics and atheists.

What we share is a reverence for life that moves us to seek truth, live fully, care deeply, pursue justice and make a difference in the world." Vision Works was developed and revised exclusively by members and adherents. It is a guide as we strive to embrace the core values that we believe are foundational to positive relationships with ourselves, others, all life and our planet. The complete document can be found at: <http://westhillunited.squarespace.com/visionworks...> (<http://westhillunited.squarespace.com/visionworks-2009/>). I would suggest that all who take the time to read it will be hard pressed not to be in "essential agreement".

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