

THE GLOBE AND MAIL*

Atheist minister fighting United Church's effort to fire her

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Toronto — The Canadian Press

Published Wednesday, Aug. 05, 2015 4:09PM EDT

Last updated Wednesday, Aug. 05, 2015 5:28PM EDT

An ordained United Church of Canada minister who believes in neither God nor Bible said Wednesday she is prepared to fight an unprecedented attempt to boot her from the pulpit for her beliefs.

In an interview at her West Hill church, Rev. Gretta Vosper said congregants support her view that how you live is more important than what you believe in.

"I don't believe in...the god called God," Vosper said. "Using the word gets in the way of sharing what I want to share."

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Vosper, 57, who was ordained in 1993 and joined her east-end church in 1997, said the idea of an interventionist, supernatural being on which so much church doctrine is based belongs to an outdated world view.

What's important, she says, is that her views hearken to Christianity's beginnings, before the focus shifted from how one lived to doctrinal belief in God, Jesus and the Bible.

"Is the Bible really the word of God? Was Jesus a person?" she said.

"It's mythology. We build a faith tradition upon it which shifted to find belief more important than how we lived."

Vosper made her views clear as far back as a Sunday sermon in 2001 but her congregation stood behind her until a decision to do away with the Lord's Prayer in 2008 prompted about 100 of the 150 members to leave. The rest backed her.

Things came to a head this year after she wrote an open letter to the church's spiritual leader pointing out that belief in God can motivate bad things — a reference to the Charlie Hebdo massacre in Paris.

"That didn't go over well," Vosper said. "(But) if we are going to continue to use language that suggests we get our moral authority from a supernatural source, any group that says that can trump any humanistic endeavour."

Rev. David Allen, executive secretary of the Toronto Conference, said he took various concerns about Vosper to the church's executive, which decided it wanted to investigate her fitness to be a minister.

First, however, they needed to know the process.

"We'd never done it before," Allen said.

In response, Nora Sanders, general secretary of the church's General Council, issued a ruling in May laying out a review process that could ultimately lead to Vosper's defrocking.

Essentially, Sanders said, the review should determine whether she was being faithful to her ordination vows, which included affirming a belief in "God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

Vosper is appealing Sanders' ruling, saying it puts any minister at risk of being judged and found wanting. An ecclesiastical court is set to hear her appeal in the fall.

Allen concedes the issue has the potential to cause disunity in the United Church, which prides itself on tolerance for diversity and inclusiveness.

"What we don't want is to limit the scope of beliefs within the church, and yet what was being questioned here was: Has she gone too far?" Allen said.

"The vision of the United Church of Canada is: There is a God in whom we believe, and our statements of faith are very clear about that."

Randy Bowes, board chairman at West Hill who led the search committee that hired Vosper, said he's had no complaints from congregants.

People want to engage in critical thinking as they explore new ways of expressing their faith and