

LIFE

Q&A: Gretta Vosper, the United Church minister who doesn't believe in God



Gretta Vosper is a United Church minister, an avowed atheist and a natural-born agitator. Some of her superiors want to kick her out of the church. She refuses to go quietly

BY MALCOLM JOHNSTON | NOVEMBER 25, 2015 AT 11:47 AM

You're a United Church minister who doesn't believe in God. That's a pretty clear-cut oxymoron, is it not?

No. I'm a product of the United Church. I grew up in it, earned my master's of divinity and was ordained in 1993. But I don't believe in a supernatural interventionist being called God.

What about Jesus—did he exist?

Probably. And he was probably crucified. But was he the divine Son of God? No. Was he supernatural? No. These are invented theological constructs.

You've been minister at the east-end West Hill United for 19 years. What does your Sunday service entail?

We stand up and sing songs, sit down and listen, interact with people. But we don't use the word God and we have no Bibles.

Instead, we read whatever edifies and challenges us to think about love and lifting each other up.

That might include poetry, plays, novels or movie scripts. We've read from *Doctor Who*.

So who or what is your God?

Essentially, the positive relationships between each of us. And it's in community that we place moral authority.

How many congregants do you have?

We had about 150 until we removed the Lord's Prayer in 2003 and it dwindled to 40. Now we're back up to about 110, plus a satellite congregation in Mississauga.

Have you ever believed in the big fella?



(Image: Erin Leydon)

Not in the Sunday school sense, though when I was a kid my parents would occasionally find me “talking to Jesus.” And apparently I claimed that Jesus taught me to skate. So I did have a sense of some invisible guy who was lending a hand.

When did you decide on the ministry?

Not until after university. As a teen, I was wild. I lied to my parents. I drove a car at 13; I drank underage. Around age 20, I was drawn to the academic study of religion and enrolled in theological college.

When you were ordained, you were asked the following: “Do you believe in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit?”

What was your answer?

“Yes.” Metaphorically speaking, I did. But I had issues with much of church liturgy. Then, eight years later, I delivered an off-the-cuff sermon in which I arrived at the conclusion that God didn’t exist. I thought, uh-oh, I might not have a job next Sunday. But my congregation courageously allowed me to preach. Many colleagues feel the same way I do but don’t state it as forcefully.

You’re a survivor of ovarian cancer. In your darkest moments, did you feel any connection to a higher power, or want to?

No. Some people have told me my survival was a gift from God. I respectfully disagree.

What happens after death?

I have no idea. Probably nothing. Which makes me all the more focused on this life.

After the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre, the United Church posted a message seeking God’s “gift of transformation” for the aggrieved. You posted a scathing rebuttal about an interventionist God. Tell us what happened next.

Lots of backlash. Now, the general secretary has created a process to review my suitability, wherein the ordination questions will be put to me again.

When they ask if you believe in God, what will you say?

It won’t be a one-word answer. And I’ll need to define each term: God, Father, Son, Holy Spirit. Ultimately, I am offended that my effectiveness might be reduced to a yes or no.

I’d wager that many people agree the idea of God-as-bearded-man-in-the-sky is irrational, but hey, it’s comforting.

Of course. I get it. As the American bishop John Shelby Spong says, “People don’t care about theology; they care about security.” You start messing with that, and they’ll fight back.

Wouldn’t an atheistic community be a better fit for you?

No. I want the United Church to accept that the Bible is not the authoritative word of God and that God is not where moral authority resides, and to recognize the innumerable divisions religion has created across millennia. If they had the fortitude to

say that, I think it could change the conversation of religion around the world. And that's what I'm betting on.

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Harvey Joyner · 5 days ago

Thank you, Gretta, for your witness to "the better angels of our character," without requiring belief in a specific, supernatural deity. There is a diversity of interpretation for that Mystery that animated Jesus and that continues to animate us with new creativity.

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Harold Sanders · 5 days ago


You go girl, I think you're on the mark.

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AM  Guest · 6 days ago



I would argue that she has faith in humanity. Which is far more powerful, as far as I am concerned.

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BugsBunny · 5 days ago



This is a great example of why liberal protestant faiths will soon splinter into irrelevance. Why would any organization pay someone who who works towards the organisation's destruction?

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Max Gourson  BugsBunny · 2 days ago

The organizations are already doing a great job of self destruction without her.

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Bishop Andrew Gerales Gentry · 3 days ago

sounds like an Episcopalian to me but hey it does not matter. the UCC if it continues the decline it has been experiencing for over a decade will cease to exist in the next 20 years or so anyway. she is just a glorified life coach which is a glorified shrink without a MA or PhD but almost as expensive. she might give Oprah a run for the money but then again no Oprah is way too good for that. she is another pollyanna with an axe to grind who wants a return on her investment of years in the wrong place! If I had a choice between re runs of Gilligan's Island and her "service" I would choose Gilligan's Island!

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Max Gourson → Bishop Andrew Gerales Gentry · 2 days ago

Oprah is the worst for peddling worthless woo crap not to mention getting the Doc Oz quack started

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Jorge Diaz · 5 days ago

I think she is just playing with definitions: God, Holy Spirit, Son. How can you define what is not possible to define. I agree though in the relationship part, ultimately God is relationship: Father, Son, Holy Spirit living in communion, like we are supposed to live or aim to live

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