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## UNITED CHURCH REFUSES TO HEAR APPEAL OF REVEREND VOSPER

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After deliberating for more than three months, having received ten volumes of materials consisting of approximately 1700 pages of written submissions, this week the United Church of Canada appeal court (the Judicial Committee Executive) issued a one-page decision refusing, without reasons, to hear Reverend Gretta Vosper's appeal.

Rev. Vosper is the Minister of West Hill United Church ("West Hill"), located in Scarborough and within the Toronto Conference of the UCC. Rev. Vosper is a self-described atheist who believes in a metaphorical god instead of the traditional theistic vision of god.

Rev. Vosper has openly applied her views throughout her ministry since 2001 and has the full support of her Congregation. Commenting on the refusal to hear the appeal, Rev. Vosper stated, "I'm stunned that a ruling with such profound impact on the diversity of theological expression by clergy in the United Church of Canada has been upheld with no apparent scrutiny or transparency. My United Church has celebrated the exploration of the concept of god, acknowledged the contrivances of ancient church leadership, and consistently held the Bible and all human documents subordinate to the ideals of love and justice. That is the United Church I and my congregation will continue to champion and the one to which I remain committed."

Randy Bowes, the Chair of West Hill's Board, stated, "No congregation in the United Church of Canada can have any confidence that the relationship they have with the minister of their choice will not be interfered with by church courts. Despite a comprehensive argument for our inclusion, West Hill has been refused participation in the review of our own minister's effectiveness. Nevertheless, we will do as we have done before, throughout this difficult process: support Rev. Vosper fully."

Trial lawyer Julian Falconer stated, "As Rev. Vosper's legal counsel for the last year, I am dismayed that the United Church would essentially close its doors to this Minister and her congregation without a full right of appeal. A one-page decision without reasons is no answer to the voluminous materials laying out the overwhelming community concern over the Church's pursuit of this Minister. This was an opportunity for the United Church of Canada to showcase its reputation for fairness and openness by holding a full hearing of the appeal on its merits. Sadly, without explanation, it is an opportunity lost."

**For further information, please visit the website of Falconers LLP at [www.falconers.ca](http://www.falconers.ca)**



## BACKGROUND

- Rev. Vosper was ordained in 1993 and became the Minister of West Hill in 1997.
- In 2001, Rev. Vosper preached a sermon deconstructing the traditional theological concept of god. Rev. Vosper openly stated that she did not believe in a theistic, interventionist, supernatural god.
- In 2013, Rev. Vosper began using the term “atheist” in solidarity with persecuted atheists around the world and to better describe her non-belief in a theistic, interventionist, supernatural being called god.
- Rev. Vosper’s beliefs and the application of her beliefs to her ministry have long been a matter of public record. Rev. Vosper has published two books (“With or Without God: Why the way we live is more important than what we believe” and “Amen: What prayer can mean in a world beyond belief”). Rev. Vosper has spoken with various media outlets about her beliefs on numerous occasions.
- On April 15, 2015, the Toronto Conference requested that Nora Sanders, the General Secretary of the church’s General Council, create a process to review a Minister’s “effectiveness” by focusing on the questions of ordination, which affirm belief in God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.
- The questions of ordination are as follows: (1) Do you believe in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and do you commit yourself anew to God?; (2) Do you believe that God is calling you to the ordained ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral Care, and do you accept this call?; (3) Do you believe that God is calling you to the diaconal ministry of Education, Service, and Pastoral Care, and do you accept this call?; (4) Are you willing to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures, in continuity with the faith of the Church, and subject to the oversight and discipline of The United Church of Canada?
- On May 5, 2015, Nora Sanders issued a ruling (“the Sanders ruling”) creating a brand new process for reviewing a Minister’s “effectiveness” by requiring a Minister to re-answer the questions of ordination.
- On May 11, 2015, the Executive of the Toronto Conference ordered that Rev. Vosper be reviewed for “effectiveness”, on the basis of the Sanders ruling.
- On September 18, 2015, Rev. Vosper appealed the Sanders ruling which lays out the process for review. To date, Rev. Vosper has not been reviewed by the church as of yet. The review process was put on hold, pending the results of this appeal.
- On March 17, 2016, the Judicial Committee decided not to hear Rev. Vosper’s Appeal of Sanders’ ruling.
- On March 30, 2016, the Judicial Committee communicated its refusal decision to Rev. Vosper.

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