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## United Church upholds decision to review fitness of atheist minister

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TORONTO - The United Church has decided to go ahead with an unprecedented review that could lead to the defrocking of an ordained minister who believes in neither God nor Bible.

In a brief one-page decision this week, a judicial committee of the church dismissed an appeal by Gretta Vosper to halt the planned review.

"After fully and thoroughly considering all submissions by the appellant and respondent, the executive of the judicial committee decided that the appeal did not meet the grounds for an appeal," the ruling states.

Among other things, the committee said the ruling initiating the hearing of Vosper's fitness to lead her east-end congregation came after full and complete consideration. The committee also held, without elaborating, that the decision accorded with the rules of natural justice.

In an interview Thursday, Vosper told The Canadian Press that she was "incredibly disappointed" by the appeal decision.

"Every pastoral relationship in the United Church of Canada will be affected by this ruling," Vosper said. "Now a court of the church can intervene in that relationship — and terminate it."

Vosper, 57, who was ordained in 1993 and joined her West Hill congregation in 1997, has for years made no bones about her beliefs, which include rejecting the notion of an interventionist, supernatural being on which much church doctrine is based.

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

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

The initial ruling to review her status came last May from Nora Sanders, general secretary of the church's general council. Essentially, Sanders said, the review should determine whether the minister was being faithful to her ordination vows, which included affirming a belief in "God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit."

It's not immediately clear when the review led by a panel will take place. So far, however, Vosper's congregation is standing firmly behind her.

Randy Bowes, board chairman at West Hill who led the search committee that hired Vosper, said he was "disturbed" by the entire process.

"Everything up to now has been adversarial, closed, no transparency. Did they look at the documents? What were the merits?" Bowes said.

"There is strong resolve to carry on because everyone keeps saying this is a special place, we cannot let this place go."

In their effort to head off the review, Vosper's lawyers had filed 10 volumes of materials comprising 1,687 pages

by way of appeal of Sanders' ruling, resulting in this week's one-page judicial committee decision.

One of the lawyers, Julian Falconer, said he was dismayed by the terse decision rejecting the appeal.

"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," Falconer said in a statement. "It is an opportunity lost."

Rev. David Allen, executive secretary of the Toronto Conference, did not respond Thursday to a request for comment. He has previously said he took concerns about Vosper to the church's executive, which decided it wanted to investigate whether she had gone too far.