

Meet the United Church minister who came out as an atheist

Rev. Gretta Vosper, a longtime Scarborough minister, is leading the United Church of Canada to test the limits of its famously progressive views.



Gretta Vosper holds a Sunday service at West Hill United Church in Scarborough. The United Church's regional body announced in May that it planned to review her fitness to be a minister. (J.P. MOCZULSKI FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

By AMY DEMPSEY Feature Writer
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Four years into her role as minister at West Hill United Church, Rev. Gretta Vosper had a crisis of conscience.

In her sermons each Sunday, Vosper spoke openly about how she did not believe the Bible was “the authoritative word of God for all time” — a conviction she’d held long before her ordination, and one that is not uncommon among United Church of Canada clergy.

Throughout the rest of the service each week, however, Vosper recited traditional prayers and hymns that perpetuated ideas she didn’t believe in: that God was the ruler of the universe and that Jesus, his only son, died for our sins.

Oh God, in your mercy, hear our prayer ...

For thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory ...

Vosper used those words until one Sunday morning in 2001, when she could no longer tolerate the contradiction. Just because her own interpretation of the prayers was metaphorical, she realized, didn't mean the people in the pews knew that. And so in her sermon that day, Vosper came out to her congregation. She made it clear that she did not believe in the God called God — a supernatural being who intervenes in human affairs.

“It's not that I don't have a definition of God that I can adhere to,” Vosper, 57, explained recently. “It's that I think we need to stop using that language.”

Afterward, she prepared to be fired. But West Hill, a particularly progressive congregation, wanted her to stay. And so began the evolution of a small Scarborough church. Prayer turned into community sharing time. Hymns were rewritten. Talk of God and Jesus was replaced with talk of love, compassion and beauty.

Vosper's unorthodox approach was welcomed, for many years, by leaders of the United Church of Canada, a historically inclusive and open-minded Protestant denomination founded in 1925, when Presbyterians, Methodists and Congregationalists formed a union. It is a church that has always avoided setting boundaries or otherwise limiting the scope of acceptable beliefs.

In the past, top elected church leaders, known as moderators, have enthusiastically come to Vosper's defence, whether they agree with her or not. No one questioned her in 2008 when she published her first book, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live Is More Important Than What We Believe*, or a few years later when she published her second, *Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief*.

“I celebrate Gretta and others like her who cause us to think more deeply about the nature of our faith,” Mardi Tindal told a Toronto newspaper in 2011, when she was moderator. “What Gretta has done has ignited a fresh conversation and invigorated the discussion.”

The tipping point came three years ago, when Vosper adopted a new label: atheist.

Not a non-theist, which is a person who doesn't think of God as a being, but an atheist, a word with varying interpretations but which many understand to mean a straight-up declaration that there is no God.



West Hill United Church in Scarborough, which Gretta Vosper joined in 1997. "We weren't looking for a fire and brimstone doctrinal kind of minister," said West Hill board chair Randy Bowes. (J.P. MOCZULSKI FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

Vosper's beliefs hadn't changed. People had been calling her an atheist for years, even though she considered herself a non-theist. But in 2013 she decided to embrace the term after she was moved by stories of Bangladeshi bloggers facing imprisonment and execution because they had been accused of not believing in God. It was a political move meant to strip the word of some of its power. But her motivations and the nuances of her beliefs didn't translate. All the public heard was the word atheist.

That's when the questions became more pointed, said Rev. David Allen, executive secretary of Toronto Conference, a regional body of the United Church. "What people kept saying is how can a minister who says she doesn't believe in God be a minister in the Christian church?"

Things escalated in January 2015, when Vosper wrote an open letter to then moderator Rev. Gary Paterson in response to a prayer published on the United Church of Canada website for those killed in the Charlie Hebdo attacks. She argued that the use of religious language was inappropriate because it reinforces a belief that motivated the killings: the existence of a supernatural God.

A few days later, a retired United Church minister in B.C. wrote a column calling for her resignation. Then in March, Andy Oudman, a talk radio host in London, Ont., devoted an entire call-in show to Vosper: "She's an atheist in a church pulpit," he said on air. "That's nonsensical. Isn't it?"

Oudman called Vosper a fraud and questioned the credibility of a denomination that would allow a minister to preach "whatever they feel like." Vosper heard about the show and phoned in. Oudman pounced. "You are stealing the tradition of a noble religion and using it when you are preaching the exact opposite of what they believe," he shouted.

Characterizing her preaching as "an abomination," Oudman ended the discussion.

He asked his next guest, Cheryl-Ann Stadelbauer-Sampa, executive secretary of London Conference, to explain why the church hadn't already booted Vosper out.

"Whether or not Gretta Vosper is a minister is a decision that is made by a regional body called a conference, and Gretta Vosper is not in London Conference, which is the conference I serve," Stadelbauer-Sampa said.

In other words: I can't do anything about Gretta Vosper. Only Toronto can.

Weeks later, Toronto would.

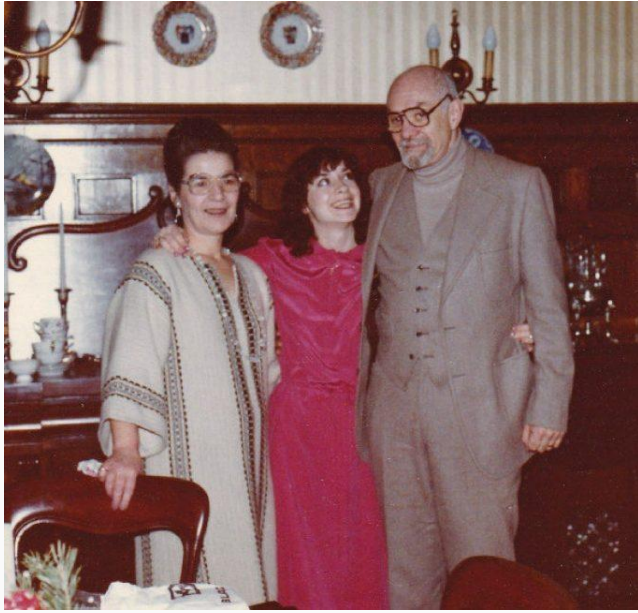
A spiritual journey

Born Margaret Ann Vosper in 1958, the future minister grew up in a big old house across the street from Sydenham Street United Church in downtown Kingston, Ont. She was known as Margie for much of her life. Her father was an engineer; her mother was a nurse and, later, an early childhood educator. Vosper was the second of four children. When she started theological college she wrote "Gretta" on her name tag and has gone by that name ever since.

Vosper was part of a small slice of a young generation who grew up with the New Curriculum, a provocative educational text produced by the United Church that emphasized the importance of moral teachings over doctrinal beliefs, and challenged Christians to question whether parts of the Bible were historically true. Its release prompted the largest ever one-year drop in Sunday school enrolment.

"My training in Sunday school was about God being love, not being an authoritarian figure, not being a judge," Vosper recalls. "I didn't learn about heaven or hell. Jesus was an example who I could read stories about and try to live up to and the Bible was that collection of stories." The New Curriculum didn't survive, but it created a base upon which Vosper's theological education would take place.

A headstrong teen, she skipped Grade 13 and left home for Mount Allison University in New Brunswick at age 17, where she studied literature, psychology and religion. Inspired by her mother, who worked at a nursery school for low-income children, she wanted to change the world.



Gretta in 1980 with her parents, George and Velma Vosper.

Vosper considered pursuing ministry after her undergraduate degree, but wasn't certain it was right for her. Instead, she chose adventure, moving to the Northwest Territories with a friend. She met and married her first husband, Bill Ferguson, in Inuvik. They had a daughter, Hazel. Later, they moved to Winnipeg. When the marriage ended in 1986, Vosper returned to Kingston and started theological school as a single mom.

In theological college, Vosper says she was taught to engage God as a concept, not as a being, and to explore the Bible "as a collection of human writings by human people with human foibles for human reasons." At times, the doctrinal stuff made her uneasy, but she says professors repeatedly assured her that her beliefs weren't out of the ballpark. Vosper married a fellow student, Michael Kooiman, in 1990, and their son, Izaak, was born the following year.

Vosper spent two years working with a senior minister in a Kingston church, which quashed any uncertainty about the path she'd chosen. The work of guiding and supporting a congregation inspired her. Her idealistic notions about changing the world were replaced with realistic motivations to influence people. The committee that interviewed her as part of the ordination process was comfortable with her views, which were more metaphorical than literal, she says. She and Kooiman moved to Toronto and became a clergy team at St. Matthew's United on St. Clair Ave. W.

A few years later, West Hill United Church, a small but thriving congregation in Scarborough, began scouting for a new minister. "We were looking for someone deemed to be progressive-thinking," said Randy Bowes, chair of the West Hill board. They found what they were looking for at St. Matthew's. In a letter, the board introduced West Hill as a congregation that wanted to "explore new roads in its spiritual journey." She joined them in 1997. Her marriage ended a few years later; she and Kooiman had grown apart theologically and as a couple, she says.

In 2008, controversy erupted within West Hill about the Lord's Prayer, which some members felt no longer suitable for Sunday service. Amid mounting pressure, Vosper removed it. The church's worship committee and board later upheld the decision, but many members disagreed. Over the next 18 months, West Hill's attendance dropped from 125 to 40. The release of Vosper's book *With or Without God* increased her profile and brought more attention to West Hill. The church has grown since 2010, with weekly attendance back to 90.

The last straw

A born agitator, Vosper has not held back in her efforts to force the United Church to have a tough conversation about modern interpretations of God. Her Twitter bio boasts, "Irritating the church into the 21st century."

Still, she was genuinely shocked when Toronto Conference announced last May that it planned to review her fitness to be a minister.

Rev. David Allen said he wouldn't use the word embarrassment to describe the sudden motivation, in the weeks after the call-in show, to do something about Vosper. "People were confused," he says, "and so what we thought was that we need to bring some kind of clarity to the situation."

"I've had a lot of people getting in touch with me, both who support Gretta and those who are wondering why the church hasn't done something long ago on this one," he adds. "What I keep saying is that the review is an opportunity for us to do the investigation and then to know at the end of it good reasons why she should be allowed to continue as a minister with the United Church, or have good reasons why she should not be."

The move was unprecedented. There wasn't even a procedure for carrying out a review. Toronto Conference had to ask Nora Sanders, general secretary of the United Church, to create one.

A United Church minister can only be reviewed for alleged ineffectiveness or insubordination. The Sanders decision, issued on May 5 last year, ties Vosper's effectiveness to her "suitability." A minister who is not suitable, Sanders ruled, cannot be effective. To assess suitability, Sanders wrote, the review committee may ask the minister to answer the ordination questions again, starting with: Do you believe in God?

Many see that question as uncomplicated, but not Vosper. The teaching in theological colleges, she argues, doesn't lead prospective ministers toward a literal interpretation of the ordination questions. "It invites students to explore those concepts broadly and deeply," Vosper says. "And very often, when people come out of the process of discovery, they no longer hold those as literal concepts."

When you answer the questions at ordination, Vosper says, you might not believe the concepts literally, but you've been given permission to answer affirmatively by a committee that guides you through the process. A review might not leave room for nuance.



Gretta Vosper and her husband, Scott Kearns, musical director at West Hill, in 2011. They have been married for 12 years.

Vosper has appealed Toronto Conference's decision to review her and the Sanders ruling on how the review should be conducted. If effectiveness is now tied to a minister's doctrinal beliefs rather than his or her relationship with a congregation, Vosper fears her colleagues could be at risk. The review process, she argues, "redefines the nature of ministry in the United Church and reduces the diversity of beliefs that can be experienced across the church."

Toronto Conference has put the review on hold until a church committee decides whether it will hear Vosper's appeal of the Sanders ruling.

Kevin Flatt, a history professor at Hamilton's Redeemer University College who has written a book about the United Church, said that as far as he is aware no one in the denomination has ever been disciplined for having liberal theological views.

"Anecdotally my sense is there are a lot of ministers who maybe wouldn't say it as forcefully as Gretta would, but at the end of the day they don't really believe in anything resembling traditional Christianity."

There has been a slow but growing movement in the United Church toward downplaying Jesus and the Bible, and moving toward a more metaphorical interpretation of religious symbols and a greater emphasis on humanist, environmental and social justice causes. Some argue it will reinvent a struggling church with declining attendance. Others believe it will destroy it. Flatt said research supports the case for the more doctrinal, God-focused denominations outliving the Vosper-style ones.

In taking a stand on Vosper, the church is now seeking to answer a question that it has never asked before: Is there a line? And has Vosper crossed it?

In an open letter, Rev. John Shelby Spong, a retired American bishop in the Anglican Church and a leading voice in the progressive Christianity movement, criticized the United Church of Canada for trying to get rid of “one of its most creative, future-oriented pastors” and urged leaders to “call your church back from its precipice.”

“Gretta has called herself ‘an atheist minister,’” wrote Spong, a mentor to Vosper. “While that language is startling to some, the Christian academy knows exactly what she is saying. To refer to oneself as an ‘atheist’ does not mean that one is asserting that there is no God; it means that the ‘theistic’ definition of God is no longer operative or believable.”

Gretta and her flock

They call her Gretta. Not Reverend. Not Pastor Vosper. Just Gretta.

She doesn’t cloak herself in robes or preach from a pulpit. She wears long skirts and ballet flats and walks among them, sharing the microphone with those who wish to offer prayers. They gather here each Sunday morning beneath a cascading rainbow of streamers that hang from the vaulted church ceiling, obscuring a large steel cross that is one of the few surviving religious symbols.

The debate swirling outside West Hill about what goes on inside West Hill frustrates and baffles church members. Critics have called their minister a bully, a provocateur, an ego-driven self-promoter, a heretic. West Hill attendees have a different view.

“Gretta is one of the most courageous people I have ever met,” says Anne Jackson, 61, who joined the congregation a decade ago. “She’s full of humility and discloses her own personal faults. She’s very real and authentic and a seeker of truth.”

They say she listens intently and anticipates need. She connects people who have common interests or goals. “When she sends us out the door, she speaks to us in a way that says, look, you have the ability to make things better — go out and do it,” says Babette Oliveira, 48, the church vocal director and a member for 15 years.

Some West Hill members were disturbed when Vosper began calling herself an atheist, but they understand her motivation and see that she is the same person she was before she began using the word.



Gretta Vosper addresses congregants at West Hill United. Weekly attendance dropped after the church stopped using the Lord's Prayer, but now about 90 people attend each week. (J.P. MOCZULSKI FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

“She was trying to defuse the power of that word to hurt people,” says Scott Kearns, West Hill’s musical director and Vosper’s husband of 12 years. “And that is so Gretta, that sort of solidarity with people being treated unfairly, unfoundedly, being oppressed over a word, over a belief.”

What most frustrates Randy Bowes, chair of the church board, is that Vosper isn’t saying anything now that she hasn’t been saying for more than a decade, with one exception: the word atheist. Bowes, 58, doesn’t see that as a big deal. Vosper has made it clear — to the congregation, if not to the world — that she doesn’t believe in a certain kind of God, but she isn’t denying the existence of God altogether.

“If this Sunday every single congregation in the United Church was to have a conversation with their minister and say, ‘What do you mean by the word God?’ I wonder how many people would be surprised.” A lot, he guesses.

The congregation is now in fight mode. “With the United Church coming after Gretta, West Hill’s basically saying no, you’re coming after West Hill,” Bowes says. “Because Gretta is a leader of West Hill, but she is a leader, not the only leader.”

Vosper admits she could have continued to describe herself as a non-theist without compromising her beliefs, and maybe none of this would have happened. But she has no regrets. “I still think it was the right thing to do.” She argues the two words mean essentially the same thing, and says those who disagree are simply weary of the big-bad A-word.

She expects to learn in the coming weeks whether a United Church judicial committee will hear her appeal. If the committee refuses, Toronto Conference could immediately begin the review.

Some have accused Vosper of fighting to stay within the United Church to protect her income, though she keeps her pension whether she leaves the church or not. They argue she shouldn’t be

on the United Church payroll, even though her salary is paid by the congregation, not the United Church.

Vosper isn't worried about losing her job or income. She has options. She could teach. She could write more books. But she is worried that her denomination is drifting away from what she has always hoped it would become.

“The United Church is the only denomination in the world that could declare the Bible is not the authoritative word of God for all time. And that needs to be said by a major recognized denomination in order to undermine every single statement that is made by any religious extremist group — that their document, whether it's the Bible, the Qur'an or the Bhagavad Gita, is not a divinely authored piece from some supernatural source.”



Vosper's supporters in the West Hill congregation are fighting to help her keep her job. (J.P. MOCZULSKI FOR THE TORONTO STAR)

The United Church has been teaching this stuff in theological colleges for decades, she adds. “So is it not time to say it publicly? A lot of people would breathe a sigh of relief. And it may set humanity on a different course.”

She remains determined to fight, in large part because the future of a strong and thriving congregation is at stake. “Now it's not just about me,” she says. “Now it's about me and my community.”

“Clergy who don't believe are a dime a dozen,” she says. “But congregations who let them actually be honest about that are extraordinary.”

Revising the prayers

From Prayers of the People ...

Then:

Oh God, in your mercy, hear our prayer

To: Sharing Time ...

Now:

In this, our time of need, may love abound

From Prayers of the People ...

Then:

For this, O Gracious One, we give you thanks

To Sharing Time ...

Now:

In this abundant blessing, we share the joy

Prayers after reading ...

Then:

Reader: This is the witness of God's people. Response: Thanks be to God

Now:

Reader: Offered as wisdom for the journey. Response: May we walk in its light

From The Lord's Prayer...

Then:

Our loving God, who art in heaven, hallowed be Thy name, Thy kingdom come, Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread; and forgive us our trespasses

...

To Words of Commitment...

Now:

As I live every day, I want to be a channel for peace. May I bring love where there is hatred and healing where there is hurt; joy where there is sadness, and hope where there is fear ...

Hymns

From "How Great Art Thou Art ..."

Then sings my soul, my Savior God, to Thee,

How great Thou art! How great Thou art!

Then sings my soul, My Savior God, to Thee,

How great Thou art! How great Thou art!

By Carl G. Boberg

To "Then Sings My Soul ..."

Then sings my soul in wonder, full and free,

amazed at all I hear and see!

Then sings my soul in wonder, full and free,

a sacred gift is life to me!

By Gretta Vosper and Scott Kearns (2007)