



*West Hill United: 66 Years and Still Evolving...*

62 Orchard Park Drive, Toronto ON M1E 3T7  
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Submission to Toronto Conference Interview Panel and Executive Committee

Re: Rev. Gretta Vosper

***From West Hill United Church***

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Dear Committee Members and Rev. David Allan, Executive Secretary, Toronto Conference:

We welcome this opportunity to present our unyielding support for Rev. Gretta Vosper by offering our perspective on the review and our relationship with Gretta, providing some clarification around West Hill and our evolving theology, and responding to challenges that have been voiced about our place within the United Church of Canada.

In 1997 Scarborough Southeast Presbytery, the congregation of West Hill, and Gretta Vosper entered into a covenant. The members of West Hill have taken a very active role in enriching and supporting this covenant. In 2004 we created a document we call VisionWorks that articulates our shared values and reflects what we hold to be of utmost significance in our community life. It calls us to examine ourselves in light of these values as we set priorities and make decisions, both individually and as a community. This document was created by members of our congregation and was affirmed by our Presbytery at its 2005 oversight meeting. Our covenant remains strong and has not been broken. In living out that covenant, Gretta meets and exceeds our standards of effectiveness.

Effectiveness is measured by outcomes and we are the ones best suited to measure those because we are the ones to set the goals and objectives for our congregation – and yet we have never been approached regarding our vision, our strategies, our objectives or the effectiveness of our minister.

Almost throughout our 66-year history, West Hill United Church has been on the forefront of progressive theology, many of our congregants have grown in knowledge of biblical critique as a result of yearly book studies of works by John Shelby Spong, Bart Ehrman, John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Tom Harpur, Elaine Pagels, and Riane Eisler, for example. And, like Gretta, many of us are products of the United Church's *New Curriculum*. When Gretta was called to West Hill, the Search Committee conscientiously sought candidates that were

progressive in their theology and selected Greta as we recognized in her the leadership qualities we sought to help us push the envelope of what church could mean in the coming years.

She has done that both through her own development as a minister and also by being emboldened by this very congregation to align our values, language, and Sunday services to better reflect contemporary progressive understandings and a focus on non-exclusive gatherings. It is vital to understand that this was not done in isolation by Greta but in conjunction and coordination with the congregation and the Board of West Hill. Greta has never acted unilaterally in any of these decisions but sought the advice or consent of the Board. West Hill and Greta were – and are – inextricably galvanized in this work.

We believe it is essential to recognize that when the congregation called Greta we embraced her progressive value-centred views because they aligned with how the congregation itself viewed and embraced the concept of god. When she began using the label atheist rather than non-theist, in solidarity with Bangladeshi bloggers who were being murdered for their secular perspectives, the congregation again supported her and indeed, there are many here who would align themselves with the fundamental issues at hand.

Like the LGBTQ community taking back language that was once used to hurt, Greta and others have reclaimed the word “atheist” in the same manner, to destigmatize the concept and to remove its power to harm. For these reasons, the congregation supports Greta.

Our congregation itself is formed with roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition and we embrace theists, agnostics and atheists. Many here would agree with the 24% of the ministers responding to a 2011 United Church Observer survey who indicated their belief in god was wholly dependent on how god was defined. That is to say, we are a congregation diverse in our beliefs yet embracing the groundedness, guidance, and growth experienced through living in right relationship with ourselves, each other and the planet. This is manifested through Greta’s ministry, our own connection with each other, and by our focus on non-exclusive services. We are brought together by a desire to belong to a community of shared values that seeks to make a difference in the world, rather than through beliefs that divide. West Hill is a vibrant and growing church, celebrating the joys and triumphs of our community on Sunday morning and sharing our burdens in times of need.

Finally, many have voiced concern about why Greta and by association, our congregation, wish to remain within the United Church. We want to respond to this as a congregation. There are several reasons. The first is that many of us have very deep roots in the United Church of Canada, some of us for more than 70 years. It is our *home*. We believe in its ability to change the world for the better through its focus on social justice and its attention to issues relevant to

Canada and the world. Others within our community have come to the United Church later and have embraced its values and focus on justice and have described the feeling as coming home.

We also recognize the UCC as a church of firsts; first church to ordain women, then married women, the first to have a woman moderator, the first to welcome LGBTQ folk as clergy, the first to recognize the tremendous harm done to indigenous peoples of Canada. We are proud to belong to a church that lifts up peace, seeks justice for the marginalized, supports equity, has a process of supporting sanctuary to those refugees who can only turn to churches as a last resort, and that walks in solidarity with other organizations seeking these same goals. At West Hill, we lift up these values as well and our outreach is focused on many of these same concerns. These include our First Nation's Study Group which, among many other projects, worked tirelessly to bring the gap in funding and the living conditions of indigenous people to the attention of local representatives of the previous federal government. Our outreach also includes voting unanimously in 2009 to become an Affirming Ministry, support for a Bangladeshi refugee family, provision of sanctuary to those who have nowhere else to turn, local community outreach and support for the M&S fund of the UCC.

We also believe strongly that the United Church of Canada is a big tent, big, bold, and strong enough to embrace those whose beliefs are on the margin of both conservative and liberal or progressive values. We have not heard of congregations or ministers being reviewed when their beliefs adhere to more evangelical, literal, and dogmatic systems, yet there is ample room in the UCC for those groups. By the same token, West Hill United and Greta have always had a place within the fold, and should continue to do so.

We have been assured by presbytery and conference that if Greta should be placed on the Discontinued Service List, the West Hill congregation will remain. Yet Greta is a doorway to many who are averse to church for a number of reasons, not the least of which is compliance to doctrines that can be restrictive to those who are looking for an ethical, values based approach to living in right relationship with themselves, each other, and the planet. The congregation of West Hill and Greta Vosper are walking along the same path bound together by the values of love, compassion, integrity and a quest for justice. These of course are the deepest values of Christians as well as others seeking to live a life of right relationship.

Respectfully, if you have concerns about Greta, then you have questions with us as congregation members. Because we view the United Church as our home, this feels very much like family members marginalizing and dismissing us. It is both hurtful and harmful and, given our covenant with Greta, sets a dangerous precedent. We raise this issue not as a way to create leverage. Rather, we believe it is crucial that we identify this hurt and allow it into this space in order to name and legitimize our deep sense of betrayal in the way this process has been undertaken and carried out. We further believe it is important for you to be aware of this

hurt and help carry the burden as something that the Conference has created and must mitigate.

Thank you again for the opportunity to give voice to our perspective and highlight our concerns about the review. The congregation of West Hill United Church has crafted this document mindfully, with openness and care, allowing ourselves to be vulnerable to the process and its outcomes. It is our most sincere hope that we can walk together in this openness and that the committee will find much here that they recognize within their own ministry and perspective.

For your reference, we have enclosed copy of our mission statement, our values and beliefs as outlined in our VisionWorks statement, and the prayer that espouses the values we try to live by, every day: "As I Live".

Respectfully,

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Randy Bowes". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Randy Bowes

West Hill United Church Board Chair



## **West Hill United Church Mission Statement**

*Moved by a reverence for life to pursue justice for all, we inspire one another to seek truth, live fully, care deeply and make a difference.*

## ***West Hill United Church***

***a progressive spiritual community where***

***how you live is more important than what you believe.***

VisionWorks is our guiding document. It articulates our shared values and reflects what we hold to be of utmost significance in our community life. It calls us to examine ourselves in light of these values as we set priorities and make decisions, both individually and as a community.

As individuals with diverse backgrounds and viewpoints, we come together, opening ourselves to new ideas that may challenge our previously-held perspectives. With roots in the Judaeo-Christian tradition, we embrace theists, agnostics and atheists. What we share is a reverence for life that moves us to seek truth, live fully, care deeply, pursue justice and make a difference in the world. We respect individual differences insofar as they are not harmful or disrespectful of others.

We draw insight and wisdom from historic religious traditions and evolving ethical and philosophical thought. From these sources, we distill the core values that we believe are foundational to positive relationships with ourselves, others, all life and our planet.

### **OUR GROUNDING IS THE INTERCONNECTEDNESS OF ALL LIFE**

With a deep sense of awe, we experience the wonder of life in all its dimensions, compelled to create meaning and purpose beyond mere physical survival and material gain. This dimension of living, which may be referred to as the spiritual, transcends the self as we connect with others and with all of life.

Our choices are grounded in our belief in the interrelatedness of all life and by our core values which guide us in living in right relationship with the self, others and the world. We acknowledge that, as a part of the web of life, we have a significant impact on the environment and on all other life with which we share the planet. We, therefore, strive to live intentionally and caringly, increasing our awareness of the consequences of our actions, advocating for rights and making ethically-responsible decisions.

## **OUR RESPONSE TO LIFE IS TO LOVE**

We choose love as our supreme value, understanding love to mean the choice to act responsibly with justice, compassion, integrity, courage and forgiveness.

Relationships are both joyful privilege and serious responsibility. We encourage and support one another as we strive to be responsible, loving people. We also recognize that conflict is inevitable in any relationship, but believe that when addressed with open hearts, it can lead to greater understanding. Therefore, when resolving differences, we value assertiveness, active listening and empathetic response. In times of broken trust, we seek mutual understanding, forgiveness and healing.

We embrace a vision of peace and social justice for people of all races, ethnicities, abilities, socioeconomic situations, gender identities and sexual orientations.

We identify and resist injustice in all forms and we strive to create, support and celebrate conditions that promote equity, dignity and community.

## **OUR SOURCES FOR INSPIRATION ARE DIVERSE**

In order to gain insight and wisdom, we actively seek out diverse resources that may inspire us or challenge our perspectives.

We find inspiration in ancient and contemporary sources drawn from the arts, sciences and humanities. We regard all explanations of life and historical claims as human and, so, fallible, understanding that all ideas are formed in particular historical, cultural and personal contexts. Therefore, we consider no text, tradition, organization or person to be inherently authoritative, assessing all resources on their own merit.

When discussing these resources, we strive to communicate our perspectives with clarity and sensitivity, conscious that ambiguity and differing worldviews are inevitable. As we examine ideas and truth claims to determine their worth and relevance, we enjoy the freedom to retain or alter our previous understandings.

As individuals, we take care to own our own experiences and interpretations. We take responsibility for seeking and creating meaning for ourselves, each person choosing his or her own path and respecting the right of others to choose theirs. When making moral decisions as a community, we study issues comprehensively, acknowledge uncertainty and apply life-enhancing values as appropriately and sensitively as possible.



## **OUR GATHERINGS ARE MULTI-FACETED**

We meet regularly to celebrate together, share wisdom and develop relationships.

During our weekly service, we draw from a variety of traditions, making use of words, music, symbols and silence, attempting to appeal to all the senses and address the whole person. We offer opportunities to focus our thoughts, share joys, express concerns, engage in self-reflection and commit ourselves to action. We also acknowledge and celebrate the significance of community and life events such as birth, partnering, loss and death.

## **OUR VISION IS GROWTH**

We celebrate areas of growth in our lives, acknowledging the possibility of growth even during the inevitable challenging periods. We also recognize that even positive growth may involve both loss and gain.

We seek to increase our understanding of ourselves, others and the world. We identify areas in our personal and communal lives that need to be addressed and then attempt to make positive change, however possible.

We assist individuals in discovering and developing talents and invite them to fulfill spiritual and administrative leadership responsibilities within our community. We encourage cooperation and participation in the visioning, planning and operational aspects of our community life. We also offer educational and social opportunities to promote personal growth and to engage with contemporary issues.

We also contribute as individuals and as a community to the growth of other organizations that promote life-enhancing values.

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As we strive to live in these ways as individuals in community,  
we often soar and often stumble.

Yet in joy and sorrow, in certainty and doubt,  
we are not alone, for we travel together in the spirit of love.



**West Hill United Church**  
**Words of Commitment**

***As I Live...***

*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.*

*I pray that I may always try  
to understand and comfort  
    other people  
as well as seeking comfort and understanding  
    from them.  
Wherever possible,  
    may I choose to be  
    a light in the darkness,  
    a help in times of need,  
    and a caring, honest friend,  
And may justice, kindness,  
    and peace  
flow from my heart forever,  
    Amen*