

Atheist minister Gretta Vosper to face formal United Church hearing

Controversial minister could be defrocked, but it may be weeks or months before a final decision is reached, church executive said.



Gretta Vosper is facing a formal United Church hearing. (RANDY RISLING / TORONTO STAR) | ORDER THIS PHOTO

By **MEGAN DOLSKI** Staff Reporter.

Thu., Sept. 22, 2016

Atheist minister Gretta Vosper's battle to keep her United Church flock just got a little tougher.

The sub-executive committee of the Toronto Conference of the United Church of Canada is asking the church's general council to conduct a formal hearing to determine whether or not Vosper should be defrocked.

Alan Hall, executive officer of Ministry and Employment for the United Church of Canada, said, in an email, that it could be a few weeks or months before a final decision is reached.

He said that there will be no provision to appeal the decision within the church courts.

The announcement made Thursday noted that Vosper will be allowed to continue in her role as a minister, with no restrictions, at West Hill United Church until a decision has been made at the hearing.

“The way forward is costly in terms of emotional and spiritual energy. The way forward is costly in terms of time and finances for both Ms. Vosper and the church,” said an online statement issued by the committee.

“At the same time, the sub-executive moved forward believing that a clear answer was required.”

The decision comes a week after Vosper spoke to defend herself against a report made by a review committee that found her “not suitable” to continue in her role because she doesn’t believe in God.

“From the outset of this process, we have urged the Toronto Conference to recognize that their decisions would impact not just one minister, but an entire congregation, and many more members of this church,” said Vosper in an online statement issued by her lawyers Thursday. “In spite of the many letters of support and concern about this process, the sub-Executive had continued down a path that can only result in division.”

When contacted by the Star, Vosper said she had no further comment.

In the same release, Randy Bowes, chair of West Hill’s board said that the church is saddened by the decision and will continue to support Vosper.

“What a sad expenditure of resources — emotionally and financially — instead of expending resources on dialogue we are stuck in some sort of adversarial trial,” added Vosper’s lawyer Julian Falconer in the statement.

Rev. David Allen, executive secretary of the Toronto Conference said in an interview that going into the deliberations the committee was aware that no matter what they decided, some people would be disillusioned and angry with the church’s decision.

He said he had no details yet with regard to the timeline of the upcoming hearing.

The report that reviewed Vosper, released earlier this month, recommended that her case be pushed to a formal hearing to determine whether or not she should be allowed to continue doing her job.

The meeting last week was intended as a chance for Vosper, her lawyers, representatives from West Hill United Church (her congregation) and from the Toronto Southeast Presbytery to respond to the review's findings and address the recommendations it made.

Everyone who spoke did so in favour of Vosper with the exception of the Toronto Southeast Presbytery, which supported the report.

Martha ter Kuile, who represented the Presbytery at the meeting, said that its support of the report's recommendations was not unanimous and that due to time constraints, consultation beyond the executive had not been possible.

A petition in support of Vosper that rejects the report's recommendations and a hearing had over 1100 signatures on Thursday.