

Atheist pastor Gretta Vosper fights for her ministry



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Gretta Vosper

Rev Gretta Vosper addresses the Toronto Conference's sub-Executive Committee.

A petition in support of atheist pastor Gretta Vosper, who was judged unsuitable for ministry by a United Church of Canada (UCC) committee, has reached more than 1,000 signatures.

Vosper, minister of West Hill United Church in Toronto, has been candid about her atheism for several years. However, a 39-page report by the UCC's Toronto Conference Review Committee earlier this month concluded: "In our opinion, she is not suitable to continue in ordained ministry because she does not believe in God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit.

"We have concluded that if Gretta Vosper were before us today, seeking to be ordained, we would not recommend her."

However, Vosper has continued to receive the support of her congregation and the number of signatures to the petition has continued to grow. It urges the UCC to reject the recommendation of the committee, describing the process as "flawed and unfair" and – implying her views are shared by large numbers of other clergy – that it has "grave implications for Gretta Vosper, Westhill [sic] United Church, an unknown number of clergy within the denomination, many members of The United Church of Canada across the country, and the reputation of the denomination in the Canadian public". It speaks of the importance of valuing diversity and not "disenfranchising many seekers".

At a meeting in Toronto last Thursday of the Toronto Conference's sub-Executive Committee where Vosper and her supporters had an opportunity to respond to the hearing, she told the Toronto Star: "This story is not about me. This story is about that group of people, because clergy who don't believe are all over the place, they just don't have a community that allows them to speak honestly about their beliefs."

Vosper posted on her blog over the weekend about her response to the committee's verdict. She said: "The finding is the finding: I'm unsuitable. The Conference can't do anything about that. What they can do is try to work with the recommendations and decide whether to follow them or not. Personally, I'm not sure what room they have to work with when someone is found to be unsuitable, but I'll let them struggle with that. I've still a whole congregation's worth of ministry to attend to."

She also provided a transcript of what she said at last Thursday's meeting, where she reiterated her call for the UCC to allow space for her to continue her ministry.