

## **Defrock atheist minister Gretta Vosper, United Church panel urges**

Popular minister at West Hill United Church in Scarborough courted trouble by calling herself atheist

A United Church of Canada committee has recommended defrocking atheist minister Gretta Vosper, shown during a 2015 service at West Hill United Church in Scarborough. (J.P. MOCZULSKI / THE TORONTO STAR)



Gretta Vosper holds a Sunday service at West Hill United Church in Scarborough last year. (J.P. MOCZULSKI / THE TORONTO STAR)



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By AMY DEMPSEY Feature Writer

Thu., Sept. 8, 2016

Gretta Vosper, the popular and controversial United Church of Canada minister who calls herself an atheist, should no longer be a minister, a review committee has recommended.

Vosper, 57, a minister at West Hill United Church in Scarborough for nearly two decades, does not believe in an interventionist, supernatural God. She preaches instead about love, kindness and human connection.

Vosper has been an outspoken voice in a slow but growing movement within the United Church toward downplaying Jesus and the Bible, and adopting 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.

A panel set up by the Toronto Conference, called the Conference Interview Committee, was asked to report on Vosper's suitability to continue serving as a minister in the United Church of

Canada. Vosper will have a chance to respond to its recommendation, and a final decision is expected next week.

Until recently, Vosper's unorthodox approach was welcomed by 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 on the scope of acceptable beliefs. Vosper, whose Twitter bio boasts, "Irritating the church into the 21st century," has pushed the limits of that openness.

In challenging Vosper's suitability for ministry, the church took the unprecedented step of asking itself whether there is a line. Vosper's future — and that of her thriving congregation — hinges on whether a 24-member review panel decides she has crossed it.

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*.

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

The West Hill congregation has stood behind her through it all. Others have balked — calling her a heretic, an abomination, a provocateur — and demanded to know why an atheist is allowed to preach from a Christian pulpit.

Things escalated in January 2015, when she 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, arguing the use of religious language reinforced the belief that motivated the killings: the existence of a supernatural God.

In May 2015, Toronto Conference announced that it planned to review Vosper's fitness to be a minister, and asked Nora Sanders, general secretary of the United Church, to create a procedure for doing so.

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

Vosper filed an appeal seeking to halt the review, arguing it would redefine the nature of ministry in the United Church and reduce the diversity of beliefs that could be expressed within the denomination. In March, the Church announced that the review would proceed.