



UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA CHOOSES DISCIPLINE OVER DIALOGUE FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE – SEPTEMBER 22, 2016

The sub-Executive of the Toronto Conference of the United Church of Canada (“UCC”) has accepted the Interview Committee’s recommendation that Reverend Gretta Vosper undergo a formal hearing to decide whether her name is placed on the ‘discontinued service list’.

On September 8, 2016, a majority of the Interview Committee found that Rev. Vosper is not “suitable” to continue as a minister in the United Church, on the basis of her theological beliefs. In a detailed dissenting report, four members of the Committee emphasized that Rev. Vosper’s “theological positions, while not in the mainstream, are not unique amongst the ministers and lay persons of the United Church.”

On September 15, 2016, the sub-Executive heard from Rev. Vosper, members of her congregation at West Hill United Church (“West Hill”) and representatives from the Toronto Southeast Presbytery. The sub-Executive also received correspondence and a petition in support of Rev. Vosper, including a letter from the former Executive Secretary of the Saskatchewan Conference, Rev. Bill Wall (retired). Rev. Wall stated that “Gretta has proved herself committed to the principles the United Church has stood for over the course of its history: an educated ministry, freedom of thought, compassion for those who suffer, and social justice. Whatever Gretta has said about the person of Jesus, I suspect he would recognize her as a true follower and therefore deserving of the title “Christian”, even if she doesn’t claim that title for herself.”

Commenting on the sub-Executive’s decision, Rev. Vosper stated, “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. In spite of the many letters of support and concern about this process, the sub-Executive has continued down a path that can only result in division.”

Randy Bowes, the Chair of West Hill’s Board, stated, “This decision means that the covenant between a congregation and their minister of choice can be interfered with by church courts. We have sought a dialogue since day one. West Hill is saddened by this result. We continue to express our support for Gretta throughout this difficult process”.

Trial lawyer Julian Falconer stated, “It’s troubling that the United Church would choose discipline over dialogue and ultimately subject Rev. Vosper and her congregation to the burden of process, over reflection. This should not be about legal hearings and an adversarial process. This should be about inclusion and support for a very healthy ministry.”

For further information, please visit the website of Falconers LLP at www.falconers.ca



BACKGROUND

- Rev. Vosper was ordained in 1993 and became the Minister of West Hill in 1997.
- In 2001, Rev. Vosper preached a sermon deconstructing the traditional theological concept of god. Rev. Vosper openly stated that she did not believe in a theistic, interventionist, supernatural god.
- In 2013, Rev. Vosper began using the term “atheist” in solidarity with persecuted atheists around the world and to better describe her non-belief in a theistic, interventionist, supernatural being called god.
- Rev. Vosper’s beliefs and the application of her beliefs to her ministry have long been a matter of public record. Rev. Vosper has published two books (“With or Without God: Why the way we live is more important than what we believe” and “Amen: What prayer can mean in a world beyond belief”). Rev. Vosper has spoken with various media outlets about her beliefs on numerous occasions.
- On April 15, 2015, the Toronto Conference requested that Nora Sanders, the General Secretary of the church’s General Council, create a process to review a Minister’s “effectiveness” by focusing on the questions of ordination, which affirm belief in God, Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.
- The questions of ordination are as follows: (1) Do you believe in God: Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, and do you commit yourself anew to God?; (2) Do you believe that God is calling you to the ordained ministry of Word, Sacrament, and Pastoral Care, and do you accept this call?; (3) Do you believe that God is calling you to the diaconal ministry of Education, Service, and Pastoral Care, and do you accept this call?; (4) Are you willing to exercise your ministry in accordance with the scriptures, in continuity with the faith of the Church, and subject to the oversight and discipline of The United Church of Canada?
- On May 5, 2015, Nora Sanders issued a ruling (“the Sanders ruling”) creating a brand new process for reviewing a Minister’s “effectiveness” by requiring a Minister to re-answer the questions of ordination.
- On May 11, 2015, the Executive of the Toronto Conference ordered that Rev. Vosper be reviewed for “effectiveness”, on the basis of the Sanders ruling.
- On September 18, 2015, Rev. Vosper appealed the Sanders ruling which lays out the process for review. To date, Rev. Vosper has not been reviewed by the church as of yet. The review process was put on hold, pending the results of this appeal.
- On March 17, 2016, the Judicial Committee decided not to hear Rev. Vosper’s Appeal of Sanders’ ruling.
- On March 30, 2016, the Judicial Committee communicated its refusal decision to Rev. Vosper.



- On June 29, 2016 the Toronto's Conference's Interview Committee interviewed Rev. Vosper on the questions of ordination.
- On September 8, 2016, the Interview Committee issued its decision, finding that Rev. Vosper is "unsuitable" to continue as a Minister of the United Church, on the basis of theological belief. The Committee recommended that Rev. Vosper undergo a formal hearing to decide whether her name will be added to the discontinued service list (disciplinary).
- On September 15, 2016, the sub-Executive of Toronto Conference met to hear responses to the Interview Committee's report and recommendations. The sub-Executive heard from Rev. Vosper, members of West Hill, and representatives from the Toronto Southeast Presbytery.
- On September 22, 2016, the sub-Executive of the Toronto Conference accepted the Interview Committee's recommendation to request the General Council of the United Church of Canada to conduct a formal hearing to consider whether to place Rev. Gretta Vosper's name on the discontinued service list (disciplinary).

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