

Dear Audrey Brown, Jordan Cantwell, and David Allen, and all members of Toronto Conference Sub-Executive,

I am a retired Diaconal Minister of our Church and wish to add my name and support to those who value Gretta Vosper's ministry within The United Church of Canada.

It is with sadness and frustration that I have read the full report, the conclusions and the recommendations of the Toronto Conference Interview Committee. For the well-being of Gretta Vosper, West Hill United Church, all ministry personnel, all congregations, and the entire United Church; I ask the Toronto Conference Sub-Executive when you gather again on Sept. 19 to reject the recommendations of the interview committee.

Gretta Vosper and West Hill United are voices we need within our denomination. The United Church in its theology, ethos and best expressions has encouraged growth: in understanding, questioning, diversity, compassion, justice, non-exclusion, dialogue. It is who I thought we were. It is what I hope we still are.

There is also much that concerns me about the process and precedents being set in this "review of suitability for ministry" procedure. There must be great care, full attention, and clear decision-making within and from all the Courts of our denomination regarding valid procedures consistent with our polity, history, and responsibilities to one another.

Especially is this so within Presbyteries where membership, oversight, discipline, care and support of ministry personnel reside.

Would any of us want our ministry vocations determined in the midst of a structural pilot-project, a singular Manual interpretation, and the uncharted waters of the first time a suitability review is based on theological grounds?

There are many ways forward that include all of us, working together within The United Church of Canada. The ministries of Gretta Vosper and West Hill United add to our insights, practices, and actions. We will be a healthier, more compassionate, more welcoming denomination with Gretta Vosper and West Hill

in our midst. We need all of us to discover how to live fully and take care of our world.

My husband, Rev. Bob Hetherington, would have said we especially need those with us who challenge us the most. Bob died last year, an ardent participant within the progressive Christian movement. He greatly valued, as do I, the challenges, articulation, the inspiration and the courage of Gretta Vosper to embrace and celebrate an evolving spirituality.

It has always been a gift of our beloved United Church that we can evolve, become more expansive, cherish one another more, live with greater respect for all. Gretta Vosper is a part of who we are. Please ensure that she and West Hill remain a vibrant minister and congregation within our Church family.

Please direct/forward this letter to all members of the Toronto Conference Sub-Executive before they meet again tomorrow; and to anyone else within your circles of leadership.

Sincerely,

Margaret Hetherington, Retired Diaconal Minister.

I'm disappointed in the United Church for its decision regarding your suitability for ministry in the church.

As someone who was raised in the UC, I still consider myself a very spiritual person, but one with no place in the church as an adult. A Ph.D. in the biological sciences only confirmed what I began feeling as a young child, that religion and its mythology, miracles, and monotheistic hegemony were stifling, and that true enlightenment can never be tied to any single brand of theology.

In this day and age, we need a new era of enlightenment. One that will put antiquated theology aside all other philosophy and knowledge, and accept a broader understanding and spirituality.

We need courageous leaders like you to bring the UC into a new era. As I see it, science and common sense should never be in conflict with spirituality and wisdom. You are at the vanguard that will, I hope, remove the blinders and minister to the growing disenfranchised, including atheists such as myself.

There is no place for conservative, fearful, narrow-mindedness in our world. There is too much at stake, and little time to work with. Reconciliation, peace and pressing environmental issues will require local to global solutions and local to global cooperation. Religious fundamentalism is only creating hate, disorder and chaos.

All reformers involved in religious freedom in the past have been persecuted. I am positive that you, along with others, will persevere AND ultimately succeed, with or without UC approval. Thank you for all the good work that you do.

In solidarity

Art Fredeen, Ph.D.

Professor, Biology and Environment

Ms Sanders

I think that it is very sad what you are doing to the United Church of my youth. I have long been proud of some of the very progressive stands taken by the United Church and experimenting with returning while maintaining my connection with other non-creedal churches.

Your action, in the Gretta Vesper situation, supported by the collection of similar minded and inflexible people that make up the majority of your committee, is regrettable, and, if carried through, will not contribute to stopping the bleeding of membership in your church. That you cannot seem to see that a wide variety of new strategies are essential, is regrettable. Of course, your actions are completely in character for churches over the years. It is just a shame to see the United Church of Canada falling into that heretic trap. That will put a chill on thinking for many of your clergy.

The “line in the sand” that you are trying to draw will definitely keep me and many of my colleagues out. And by the way, I’m 79 and definitely a university educated “white hair” that should be one of your target markets. Most of the young people that you should be attracting want to seek truth, care deeply, build community and care for one another. Dogma doesn't come into it. If you want the United Church become another of the conservative collection and out of the progressive mainstream, you are certainly moving in the right direction.

Sadly

David Collacutt

Innisfil, ON

cc West Hill United

Gretta touched me when she ran a weekend conference in Oxford a year or so ago.

I do not entirely concur with her views, mostly because I find that the trouble with atheism is that there is often a struggle in defining what it is that atheists don't believe in: - and I believe that many people would call themselves theists while sharing atheists' views of what it is that they don't believe in.

The answer is so darned simple that almost every church - and the leaders of many denominations and many religions should be pilloried for missing the point:

Behaviour is far more important than belief.

I pray that Gretta will remain in her role as an important (global) spiritual leader, and that a faithful community - wherever and however - will support her morally and materially.

With love and blessings

Bob Harvey

Lincoln, England

Dear Rev Vosper

I want to thank you for standing up for your beliefs and saying "I am still more than suited for my vocation and more than that I'm good at it." I hope there are 10 of thousands more like you out there because we really need them and you.

Once again thank you so very much and I hope for the best of life for you. You give me hope.

Tom Thompson

My name is Harrison (Buddy) Carlton from Austell Georgia, USA and it has been my pleasure to have met and talked with Gretta when she was visiting some friends of ours here earlier this year. I appreciate what you are doing to support Gretta in her following her conscience to serve people who look to her and go with her in moving forward toward a better understanding of how to love more and judge less. Have we not learned anything from the trials of Lloyd Geering?

I come from a background with twenty years inside the organization known as Jehovah's Witnesses, from 1963 until 1983. One of the reasons why I had to leave was because of a policy of not being able to question the doctrines or policies of the leadership in Brooklyn. When I began to ask why, then I was given the alternatives of being disfellowshipped or writing a letter of disassociation from the religion. I choose to write a letter and end my life under their authority. It was a painful decision because I knew it would cause a separation in my family because my former friends still in the Watchtower were warned not to talk with me. Also, my wife and her family who were still witnesses had to shun me and not be seen with me or face penalties themselves. I know them well enough to know if it weren't for a policy set by the governing body, they would have no problem still talking with me and being seen with me. The love for others seems to be like a light switch, able to be turned on and off by a group of men in Brooklyn.

All of this is to say how sad it is to hear that there seems to be a place now in the UCC where this policy of not allowing ideas or policies to be debated is a parallel to that of the watchtower. It is a position that reminds me of an article written by W.P. Brown, a member of Parliament in 1953, called 'Imprisoned Ideas'. Read it and see what you think.

Surely the leadership does not want to go there and be seen as just another authoritarian religious body, bent on defending its status quo and failing to continue dialogue for further growth. Keep trying to appeal to them on the basis of how does this action show an attitude of 'let all things be done with love' ?

Love, peace and grace follow you....Harrison Carlton.

Dear West Hill friends.

I appreciate the circular just received telling how you are seeing and coping with the current harsh/ambivalent way you are being treated.

Thank goodness there will be at least some sober second thought.

I also appreciate the way you feel and live out your faith as a congregation; very much hope the criticism from a part of the church will only strengthen your family of faith.

This letter and the feelings of others I know is also intended to support your faith, your fellowship and your witness.

I particularly support the many ways you are involved in social and justice actions – e.g, climate change.

I am a member at TSP and we have worked hard on that challenge as well.

I send by mail a small gift of money as support.

Especially warmest greetings to Gretta; her contribution is so important to our efforts to bring meaning to younger generations, and those with only old interpretations of faith and mystery.

Jim Kirkwood

It is much harder to process this decision than I expected. How much more so it must be for you. I know that you all have supported and encouraged Gretta as you have journeyed together. At this time Ann and I remember you and send our good wishes for supporting each other within the community that is West Hill. This will help you deal with the hurt, disappointment and anger that will be felt just now until you can move on into your future. From a distance we still support your journey and recognize the courage you show by traveling forward together.

Gretta, you're a beacon of light to us! West Hill, you're awesome.

In this time of need- love will abound.

Very best wishes

John & Ann McKechnie

Gretta, I am a member of your "wider community".

If I did not live so far away, I would be an adherent at West Hill.

Once admitted to the Ministry, surely Effectiveness is measured by Results, not by Admission Criteria.

Hopefully Nora Sanders will insist that criteria for measuring Results will be a top priority item on the agenda for the formal review that she is convening.

Those criteria should be consistent with the Mission Statement of The United Church of Canada, whose future will be shaped, in large part, by the outcome of this review.

Yours is a worthy cause.

Jim McPherson

September 22, 2016

You have my total support. It's difficult to believe this is even happening in 2016! Gretta deserves our support and loyalty.

Pat Tinkess

Dear Gretta

I am disappointed in the United Church of Canada. Please have my best wishes and support for your vision.

Sincerely

Susan Neufeld

September 23, 2016

Keeping you all in my heart at this time and hoping for a better outcome from the next action.

Valerie Barnes-Connell

Dear Gretta,

I am a member of a Thursday discussion group of about 25 persons at Emmanuel United Church, Ottawa. We are casually referred to as The Heretics. I do not speak officially for our congregation, but I can assure you that the general attitude of “The Heretics” vis-à-vis the inquisition into your “suitability” for ministry is one of dismay and disenchantment with the leaders of Toronto Conference and any who arrogate to themselves the authority to judge you.

Be assured of our moral approval of the stand you have taken, even those of us who disagree with you in the fine nuances of the Faith.

Yours in full support,,

Russell Smith

I think that for most of us who have been raised in orthodox religion, it is indeed a leap not only of faith,

but of reason, to truly comprehend what Gretta is telling us. I pray that not only those who read her dissertation, but the Faithful at large, have the courage to ponder the basic tenet of her message: generosity.

I pray that Gretta gets the support she needs, because it is the enlightened ones in our midst, like her, who blaze the trail into our future, in the quest of making this a better world.

Sincerely and respectfully yours, Orville Amyotte

Hi Nora and Gretta and whoever else wants to read along with bardstir
John...

I have heard Gretta's call for generosity and her lawyer's plea for dialogue rather than discipline

For some time now, I, as have many others, pondered this situation.

It seems to me this is a no-win and no wine dilemma.. The church system represented in Nora as General Sec

Is damned if it does and also by some if it does not...

The smell of witch hunt, inquisition, heresy trial is so unlike the vision of the UC and it plays into the media's hands.

Circling the wagons seems so archaic and out of step with a so-called inclusive, expansive UC...

I write as I remember reading

JB Philips.. Your God is too Small.

Leslie Weatherhead's The Christian Agnostic

The God is Dead writers of the 60s, when I was at Emmanuel College

Bishop Robinson's writings

Bishop Spong

Etc etc....

For me the bottom line is are we guided by dogma, doctrine and systemic orthodoxy

Or by what some call orthopraxy - living and doing love, justice, altruism, service to others, etc.

I am reminded of how Cardinal Ratzinger (later the Papa) silenced and dismissed many priest-academics

Including Matthew Fox... Is that the path the UC wants to take????

There are many clergy wondering if they are next for a hearing because they do not believe all the formal stuff.

Some will remain silent and stunted, especially if they are close to retirement age.

I recall a dedicated UC minister, saying upon retirement; “Now I don’t have to believe or preach all this.”

As one who served the UC for 30 years and grew up in it from womb-time... and having been suspended, fired and defrocked, I lament that escalation is the game plan....I pleaded with church officials to come and sit with us in circle to listen to one another and resolve our differences in a spirit of mutual respect. However the system chose the legal adversarial method of attack and discredit and destroy.

What ever happened to the spirit of negotiation and mediation

And creative conflict resolution.

I ask what would Jesus do?? And recall the teaching of ‘judge not....’ and forgive a lot of times

And before coming to the altar – go and be reconciled with the one with whom you differ.

There must be a better, more humane, just and more Christ-like/Christian way and a creative, caring, compassion-based

Path of resolution and re-soul-ution.

Perhaps if we all sang “Deep in our hearts there is a common story/song” we might be inspired by Spirit/Mystery

to take a different route....

Bless-sings through it all..

John Wesley Oldham

I have found Gretta Vosper to be a very effective minister. When meditating while walking, I quietly, and usually silently, recite a meditation which Gretta shared a few years ago. It goes like this:

In this passing moment, be my heart at rest, that I might consider, love's undaunted quest.

Might I sense around me, naught to do me harm, love my sure foundation, 'Neath me sure and firm.

Might my days be joyful, and my evenings sweet, every ending happy, every day complete.

Might I turn more surely in towards what is good, caring for my body, as I know I should.

And as each day opens, bridging all that's been, might I stand within it, peaceful and serene.

Then as evening's mantle, billows over the land, might I rest remembering, all love can withstand.

While almost everyone accepts the process of evolution as scientifically correct, there is wide variance among Canadians and western society generally about the existence or non-existence of a theistic god who is "out there" and to whom we can communicate through prayer. A sizeable segment of our population, and a significant number of members of The United Church of Canada are "soft atheists," that is, people who cannot say they believe in a god out there. Believers and nonbelievers have not really got control of what they believe, as I believe that a great portion of their beliefs are, after they have read the arguments on both sides, genetically based. Their early relationship with their fathers I think is also a major determinate.

In the United Church who leads those struggling to be compassionate and loving towards others, as Christianity's foundation requests, who are also atheists?

Gretta Vosper is a minister of The United Church of Canada who is a sensitive, compassionate and effective leader. There are, I'm told, other United Church ministers who do not believe there exists a theistic god.

I believe in the concept of god is a metaphor for the slowly developing love for one another. I think about love for others, just as Gretta surely does.

Cutting to the chase, we in the United Church need soft atheists like Gretta (who really can take the hard and fast belief that there is or isn't a god out there? It's illogical). For the sake of Canadians who highly value Gretta Vosper, as I do, she should continue her ministry in our United Church of Canada.

Ley Davison

Dear Gretta,

I am so sorry to hear about these proceedings as I had imagined that you were well supported.

I believe that you are engaged in a wonderful ministry of listening to people's spiritual needs and experience, and not imposing what they should be, as the Church is stuck with.

This listening is the priceless thing that I have recognized in the Quaker Faith, to which, as a confirmed atheist, I have been strongly attracted.

You are not a freak as the Church may see you– you are a modern exemplar of an ancient Christian tradition that moved beyond testing beliefs long ago.

All love and strength to you.

Hugh Rock

As an Anglican living in Québec who has always regarded the United Church of Canada as a progressive and prophetic voice in Canadian society I am deeply saddened by these developments. I deplore them as retrograde and regressive.

It is somewhat ironic that Gretta furthers the work of three Anglican bishops: John Robinson, John Shelby Spong and Richard Holloway, former Primus of the Scottish Episcopal Church! The Anglican Journal website for September contains a review of Gerald Robinson 's *Theology for Atheists* (2016) Kindle \$9.99 that references Gretta. I reviewed *Without or Without God: Why the Way We Live Is More Important Than What We Believe* for The Montreal Anglican June 2008 under the heading: Pushing the envelope: how far can you go within the historic church? I recommended the book saying that it deserved to be "read and pondered."

Hopefully this controversy will attract media attention and stimulate public discussion of post-theism/non-theism at time when supernatural theism is losing its hold and people are searching for alternatives.

Bill Converse

Montréal

If West Hill is promoting LOVE and if God is Love—you are supporting the one directive of Jesus—that we learn to love one another. Hurrah for West Hill and what you stand for—openness without the creeds -etc.

Don Inkpen

Here is the message I sent to Nora Sanders. I'm sending positive, healing energies in your direction. The Kawartha Truth & Reconciliation Support Group of which I am a member ends every meeting with a double hug. It's very powerful. I give you a metaphorical double hug

Jim Abel

"Dear Ms Sanders

I hope you and everyone at head office of the UCC read the article in the Toronto Star by Rick Salutin Friday Sept 16, 2016. It describes clearly how the formerly open, Spiritual, dare I say Christian, UCC, so often a trailblazer, an example to the world, is at risk of becoming just another narrow, irrelevant Church, ruled by fear and belief systems that were outmoded 100 years ago. How very sad!

A former member, now a graduate of the UCC"

Ms. Vosper:

I completely support & I deeply admire your struggle to remain in the ministry of the United Church of Canada.

My history: After graduating from Emmanuel College in 1976, I was ordained by Toronto Conference.

However, because I was conservative in doctrine and evangelical in my expression of theological orthodoxy (the 20 Articles of Faith in the Basis of Union, and all that), I had to endure an increasingly hostile ecclesiastical environment.

The UCC always flattered itself by maintaining a façade of tolerance & acceptance of people of all shades of belief --- but it sure wasn't accepting of people like me!

On the contrary!

When I was finally squeezed-out of the UCC in 1991, it was politically-OK to harass & persecute "fundies" like me --- so I left, deeply hurt, for another denomination.

I see that the UCC bureaucracy is now swinging its hostile guns in the opposite direction of the theological spectrum and presently has them aimed at liberal-minded people like you.

Nevertheless, I am inspired to see you standing-up to the intolerant heresy-hunters who are attempting to oust you.

Freedom of Conscience is indivisible: You have every bit as much a right to an accepted place in the ministry of the United Church as I did 25 years ago.

Either the United Church is a "broad" church or it isn't.

Just as there should have been room in the UCC for clerics of my conservative stripe back then, so ought there to be room for clerics of your liberal stripe now.

I hope that you have a good lawyer --- when dealing with UCC presbyteries & conferences, let alone the General Council, you need one!

I sincerely wish you all the best. ----Bob Rowlands

Hi folks

Re the pending heresy inquisition witch hunt trial of Gretta and its implications for you folks and for all the United Church of Canada and beyond religious borders.

I ran across this Feb 28 text which I think you folks might resonate with and with no God-talk. It fell out of a three-ring binder of my trumpet transpositions for Sunday

Hymns and songs..

Expect you will experience some of the themes, such as “tests and trials” and “strain and sorrow”

But also the faith that gives hope as ‘we shall share the vision of new day’.....etc..

Out of apparent death comes transformation. It happened to me with the death of my ministry in the UC at age 54 after 30 years of ordination,, and

Being told to f off – i.e. frock off!! – But out of the ashes the phoenix of resurrection rose and I look at my dismissal

And departure as a blessing in disguise as trial became trail into new adventures, opportunities and possibilities- it being all/ahhh/awe part of the hero’s journey

Thanks to Joseph Campbell’s writings....Being fired is not the end! Let it be the means to becoming fired up!!!!!!

Please share with the congregation if Gretta and Exec agree.

Perhaps your resident composer will be amused to set it to new up-rising and uprising -sing music. With needed word changes and a third verse? I.e. adversity into add-verse-itea!

But try it to Danny Boy and sing the lament part (lines 1-4 in each verse) with reflection and the hope lines (But we shall rise...So we shall sing!!!!) with grit, gumption, guts and gusto

In the spirit of vim, verve, vigor and vitality which grows out of your courageous, caring community of inclusive, expansive lovin’kindness and kin-ness.

Onward, in the Spongian tradition!! (strokes and death can never kill the vision, dream, raison d'être, purpose of serving and living as agents of love, channels of peace.)

The national UC may technically own your building and land – but they have no monopoly on your spirited/ual vision, dream and cause. Keep on worshipping there even if and when the sheriff and the police come to evict you!! Your witness will continue to be an inspiration to many, including me, with thanks and support.

I am singing it now just before I push 'send'. Some Irish Whiskey might embellish the word-flow and better bonding with the notations!

Bless-sings anyway and any way the Spirit of Love moves you to good-will.

Bardstir John at 71 ½ and counting – (on you)

LIFE IS A CHALLENGE

Life is a challenge and a great adventure.

There's times of tests and trials that we face.

There's grief and illness when our hearts know sadness
and we do long for peace and Love's embrace.

But we shall rise beyond the strain and sorrow
to greet the rainbow that will follow storm
and we shall be a people blessed and guided
so we shall meet the night and soon the dawn of morn.

Our faith sustains us through the darkest valleys.

It gives us hope transforming deepest fears.

It is a beacon shining through the shadows.

It is a power that wipes away our tears.
So we shall sing the ballads of our spirit
and we shall share the vision of new day
and we shall be renewed with trust and purpose
as we are given strength to venture in Love's way.

John Wesley Oldham; #7812; Sun. Feb. 28, 2016; 12.45-12.50 p.m. driving with one hand and writing with the other en route to World Village Gospel Choir practice.
Verse 2 at 6.35-6.40 pm,

I have followed Gretta Vosper's passionate mission to provide an intimate home for those members of her community who do not relate to a superstition-based conventional church but wish to continue with the fellowship found in a church-like environment. Sometime I wonder why she wishes to do so, but the fact that she does engenders my deep respect.

One day, thankfully, we will witness many more "West Hills" communities as the world confronts a future that cries out for a solution to barriers that differentiate humanity and seek an all inclusive society. Please let your congregation know that thousands of Canadians and non-Canadians alike are rooting for Gretta.

Thank you

Heber G. Smith

Though I am not a member of West Hill United Church, I write in support of Rev. Gretta, because I think she is a modern thinking pastor, who sometimes think out of the box.

The public of the Christian Faith, expect their leaders to lead, taking into account the current information available and explain in a believable fashion that does not sound ridiculous.

Relying on the old notion of being 'Faithful' most leaders espouse old theories that sound ridiculous to the rational individual.

When a priest stands on a pulpit and claims that 'Heaven' is up there (pointing towards the sky) and 'Hell' is in the middle of the earth, for a Rational person it is ridiculous. There is nothing up there, except a black void that is visible to the naked eye, but Science has proved conclusively that there is nothing up there, except for some space debris.

On July 4th. this year an American space craft arrived in Jupiter's Orbit after travelling @ 165,000 mph for 5 years (over 7.5 Billion miles) and did not pass any settlement of Good Dead Souls (Heaven).

Yet our pastors continue to preach Heaven and Hell as geographical locations, like Toronto is Heaven and Chicago is Hell. I am also told, I did not hear it personally, that some Tamil Pastors claimed that if you dig a hole deep enough, you could hear people screaming and crying in Hell.

In the late eighties and early nineties, the less educated older Tamil Refugees who flocked to Canada, lapped it up. They are the 'Faithfull.' and not exposed to English Language News or information, most remained ignorant. In the late forties and fifties I too grew up believing in Heaven and Hell, Angels and Devils and of course Cowboys and Indians and in the Black and White films, the good guys always wore white hats while the bad wore black hats. In the late sixties and early seventies I was exposed to more English Language news and information and it opened my eyes to rational thinking.

Faith? What is faith?

A free thinking ex-pastor - a son of pastor parents from Nova Scotia, explained it beautifully and very simply thus - Faith is when we believe implicitly in the person we trust. For instance, you are two and your mother teaches you that two and two is five. You believe her and trust her, now you are five and in school, the teacher teaches you and proves to you that two and two is four and not five, you believe her because you are now a bit rational.

Gretta, I believe wants her congregants to be good people, be Just and Rational, not believe in the 'Mumbo, Jumbo' of the old Voodoo days but think broadly and uplift ones and others. This kindled my interest in her, her thinking out of the box, especially as a clergy, it is awesome.

General Secretary Nora Sanders, Please suggest to the Toronto Conference, The Ministry Personal Review Committee and all others interested to think out of the box, think of the current information available that do not square with what was written fifteen hundred to two thousand years ago by hundreds of individuals with varying levels of intellect, including Voodoo.

Christian Pastors should lead from the front, not parrot old beliefs and draw a paycheck without upsetting the older folks who already have one foot in the grave.

Educate and up-lift your congregation, maybe it will set them free, education usually does, who knows it may eventually end the churches as we know now.

Leading from the front will stop it or at least slow it down.

Give Gretta Vosper that freedom, to educate her congregants.

Sent By

Kail T Rajah

A Proud Member of Our Trinity United Church Family

Strong and United

"I am somebody. I was somebody when I came. I'll be a better somebody when I leave.

I am powerful, and I am strong. I am humbled by the spiritual experience that I get here.

I have things to do, people to serve, and places to go."

The magic ring of bells and the harmony of the Sunday morning choir

Welcoming all people with a renewed vision to inspire

It is the passion of our minister with the energy of her eternal youth

Leading us into to spiritual meaning, based on sound logic and truth

We are proud members of Trinity United with reason to rejoice

Living as we believe, being different is our freedom of choice

Ever proud of our precious legacy, human rights defenders

Standing proud and tall for the dignity of different genders

For our warm church family I will ever be proud

Alas, over the United Church of Canada there is a dark cloud

Freedom of choice is preached loudly each day

But narrow actions speak so loudly, I hear not what they say

Limiting the wonder of the unknown to their definition of it

In contrast to true logic, deep wisdom or wit

Allowing for valued differences, leadership strong and true

A journey into the future, with a vision of what it means to be strong and new

Out of the dark ages, with passion and fire to ignite

Supporting Gretta Vosper, lest we forfeit our precious faith right

Standing at the crossroads, I know not what to do or say

Flee from this narrowness or do battle another day

Ken R. Estabrooks

Dear Ms. Vosper:

To be charitable, I am appalled by the way in which you have been treated by the United Church in Toronto.

I am a disciple of Robinson and Spong, and feel that you have carried Spong's ideas to the logical next step, and I know that many in all denominations would consider me a heretic for this stance.

I am convinced that the basic illness in the church today stems from the inability of many to see that the membership and financial problems are symptoms of a more serious matter - the growing number of members of what Spong calls "the church alumni association" - many of whom can no longer tolerate the adherence to myth as if it was history. You have broken away from that pattern, and gone back to "Love Your Neighbour" as the basis of faith, and of a faith community.

I suspect that you have a good deal more support outside the church than you do within it!

With all good wishes,

David Paterson

Gretta,

I read about the United Church's decision yesterday with great frustration and disappointment. I'm writing to you because I posted about my disappointment on Facebook (as any good millennial would) and was encouraged to reach out to you by one of my former United Church ministers.

You don't know me, but I've sure heard of you. Over the years when religion was brought up with disdain among my friends and colleagues I proudly boasted of belonging to the United Church – a church accepting of an atheist minister. I boasted of growing up in a congregation that was more often led by a woman or and openly LGBT minister than a straight man. I spoke about belonging to a church that puts community, caring for the less fortunate and spreading the values of love and respect for all first. A church that lets individuals commit to those values and understand their faith in their own way.

A church that I feel comfortable in, despite considering myself agnostic, perhaps atheist.

You see, I'm a 24 year old tech entrepreneur - so not exactly part of a demographic known for its "religiosity". Though you don't know me and I don't know you, the simple fact that you were a United Church minister was a central part of how I understood the United Church. A central part of how I understood my faith.

I fundamentally see the United Church's rejection of your ministry as a rejection of my membership.

Now, if I'm being completely honest, that probably won't turn many heads in the General Counsel's Office. I haven't been to church more than a few times a year since leaving home for University. I've visited a few congregations in Ottawa, but never really found what I was looking for. But this decision does nothing but push me further from the Church and makes it less likely that I will find what I am looking for in the United Church.

With that said, a promise, a question and an offer of support:

- The next time I find myself in Toronto on a Sunday I'll be sure to stop by and take in a service at West Hill United. Frankly, I'm not sure why I haven't before.

- Are you aware of any communities in Ottawa that share similar values or approach to faith as you and your congregation? I would like to find a faith community that shares my beliefs, in a United Church if possible or elsewhere if not.

- If there's anything I can do, in your continued discussions with the United Church or in the process of leaving the United Church and forging your own path please don't hesitate to call on me. I want a church in this country that represents my values and I can feel at home in. I'd be happy to help if I'm able.

Thank you for speaking up on behalf of the members of the United Church who like me share your beliefs – or at least beliefs similar to yours. I'm hopeful that you will succeed in overturning this decision because at the most basic level it doesn't fit with my understanding of the United Church.

All the best in your continued struggle.

Sincerely,

Chris

Hang in there, this is not over yet by any means in my opinion. There are many more like minded clergy than you might think. You and of course Gretta have a great deal of support.

Merv Dickey

Dear Gretta, and Nora,

I have been following this conversation for some time. For me, it is a very important one. The reason being, I have a deep faith in Divine/Energy, Divine Energy, if you will. A year and a half ago I left a Theology School, where I was offered a full scholarship. I was one of only three people not studying to be a Minister, and one of only about five Catholics there. My relationship to Catholicism is being born into it, and having many friends and colleagues, including the astounding, Sister Helen Prejean, Father Diarmuid O'Murchu, and Rev. Dr. Matthew Fox. I left the Theology School, which was essentially a United Church School, because not only did it not teach Theology, but Christian Theology, but mostly because it was racist, ageist, and patriarchal. I made several friends and am in contact every so often with two of the Lecturers/Professors there. I never fit there. But I felt deeply connected to my Faith. I was eventually "accepted," by those "holy" people of God/de. BUT was always never part of the club.

For me, religion is a club, and within those clubs off-shoots of clubs, and communities.

This is not an issue for me in the least, because I choose not to sign on to any formal club or its rules. A few months ago, in an email conversation with, Father Richard Rohr, the well-known Catholic Dominican Priest, I told him that my religion is Sawbonna. A Zulu word I learned from the man who murdered my Father, a man who is now a dear friend. I told him that I do to sign on to clubs to I so love the work of several of its members, past, present, those who have left, those who inspire (breathe life and meaning into not only their own lives, but into that of others). Richard said, continue to live your Faith, Margot/RavenSpeaks.

From the conversations with you, Wonderful Gretta, with your Club/Community, and with what you, Nora, are engaged in, what I see is rich digging. Rich and fertile ground of conversations and questions; questions founded on what is and is not the value, meaning, expectation, and want of "your" community/ies.

I admire that you are all talking. Even though it is pain-FULL, and profoundly challenging. I could NEVER be part of a formal religious community/club, but I

have been and am invited to many of them to give talks on Sawbonna: I See You. I see our shared-humanity. I experience our I and Thou. Not our I and You.

I and Thou.

I do not believe Divine Energy cares for clubs, though inspires us: Breathes Us. We do not have to choose a club or be chosen by one to be Breathed.

I wish you all the very best. And I reiterate, I admire that you are speaking. ALL of you. It takes courage, and it means that you are better articulating how you can live with your humanity, your articulation of Social Justice. While at that Theology School, I had a moment of thinking that I might study for United Church Ministry, BUT knew when faced with the exclusionary practices of who belongs and who does not, that Divine Energy, was not being WITH-NESSED in a manner that fit my yearning and my need for belonging to one community, to one race: that of each living being.

I hold you and everyone on this journey in my heart.

Sawbonna,

Margot Van Sluytman/RavenSpeaks

Gretta is a mentor and authentic spirit of change for many of us. The United Church would be advocating a humanist institutional handcuffing of modern day theological and archeological discovery, by quieting any 21st century thinker and prophet in its midst. Why on earth is the hierarchy quivering in fear of upsetting a system that is in part, causing the demise of attendance and relevance?

Rev. Trev. Whiting

To our brothers and sisters of the West Hill United community:

We hold you and your minister Gretta in our hearts and wish to communicate our support in this latest development by the sub-executive of the Toronto Conference. We share the concern for Gretta's future and that of a vibrant and relevant faithful community.

Rev. Dr. Eric Bacon

(Together with those members of our congregation who have followed this review process and are saddened and angered by its punitive and unfair trajectory)

Lawrence Park Community Church, Toronto.

A few years ago, we (some members of the First Grantham United Church book club 'Between the Covers') came and attended a Sunday morning service and stayed for coffee/tea etc. Greta's words were honest, full of hope and wellness.

If the United Church of Canada has the welfare of all people in its spectrum, there must be Greta Vospers under its umbrella.

We need her as part of the United Church of Canada.

Respectfully submitted

Ruth Barclay

Hi, West Hill UC:

I've been a secular humanist for some years now. I participate actively in our local congregation (Oasis United Church, Penticton, BC). I am a hypocrite. I sing songs of praise to a god, although I reject the concept. I join in singing the lord's prayer, even though prayer is, to me, an act of futility, which does little except make (some of) the people praying feel better. I sit through sermons talking about faith and god and Jesus. We have, for at least five years, given close to 10% of our gross income to the church. I am the congregation's computer and sound person. I owe finding my wife (Barb McFadyen-Smuin, former Naramata Centre employee) to the United Church.

You have probably encountered the article, "I Am a Presbyterian Minister Who Does Not Believe in God", which floats around the web. It describes many things which I experience.

Oasis United Church, a community of people who try to treat each other respectfully, is dear to me. They have known me for years while I struggled to figure out what "god" is, to know god, to love god, to believe in god, to feel god, to live a "faithful" life. After a year-long bible study (the Disciples program), I finally gave myself permission to quit trying to be something I am not. And I still support them in their journeys, and they support me in mine.

You have probably encountered the article, "I Am a Presbyterian Minister Who Does Not Believe in God", which floats around the web. It describes many things which I experience. To me, the actions of people involved in a church are more important than what they affirm as "beliefs". As far as I can see, if Gretta Vosper is not fit to be a minister in the United Church of Canada, then I am not fit to be a member.

Standing with you...

Ron Smuin

I have read what I received via email re Gretta's review. I very much appreciate the background information and clearly stated needs the congregation experiences at this time. I am myself a member of an expansive church in Edmonton, though I do not consider myself an atheist. While I may not share all of Gretta's clear cut positions, I respect the fact that she has dedicated herself to your congregation in ethical, progressive ways and is supported by you for doing so. A review is an unpleasant way to have a dialogue and it is unfortunate that this was the choice made by the powers that be.

The Church needs to revisit our theology and perhaps this will provide an entryway, if not the best one, for that to happen. To that end I will endeavor to write a letter or letters and would like to copy it to your congregation. Is this the email with which to do that or is there an address to send it to?

May you all hold to the courage of your convictions and may the larger Church have the wisdom to engage the conversation with vision and compassion.

Sincerely,

Virginia Sauve, PhD.

Edmonton, AB

Dear Esteemed Colleagues in the United Church of Canada,

I am writing on behalf of Rev. Gretta Vosper. Gretta is a friend and colleague. I am a pastor in the Presbyterian Church (USA). I host a radio program, Religion For Life, and Gretta has been a guest twice.

I am writing in hopes that you will be an advocate for Rev. Vosper. I have nothing to say about polity and process within the United Church of Canada, of course. What I wish to write to you about is larger than Gretta, you or I, or our respective denominations. I wish to write about the intellectual future of Christianity and the importance of ministers like Gretta Vosper as they fearlessly present to us the issues we face.

What are these issues?

We live in a universe that is 13.75 billion years old. Earth is 4.5 billion years old. It is a pale blue dot in the suburbs of a galaxy that is one of billions. Humans have evolved through a process of natural selection. We share a common ancestor with all of life going back to single-celled organisms from perhaps three billion years ago. It is an incredible universe that science is unfolding before our eyes. Yet religion with its ancient creeds and symbols is still in a pre-modern era.

All of the symbols and doctrines of faith from creation to eschatology including “God” are products of a pre-modern era in which humanity was “created” around 6000 years ago in a garden in the midst of a geocentric universe over which Father, Son, and Holy Ghost could be imagined as real entities existing in real time and space. These doctrinal formulations are little more than poetry today.

As one wag put it: Galileo put God out of a home and Darwin put God out of a job.

A supernatural interventionist deity, a god called God, is no more credible than a hammer-wielding Thor scaring humanity with his thunderbolts. By virtue of living in a modern world, we are all a-theists whether we want to admit it or not. No one expects a divine being to send rain, heal diseases, stop the sun in the sky, spin the planets, or cause my team to win in battle or in football, except perhaps fundamentalists.

What we do with our symbols of faith, how we approach them, what we keep, what we reject, what we redefine and re-imagine is the responsibility of our generation of ministers and theologians. "God" must be on the table for dissection. That is our task. The one thing that will cripple our work is the silencing of our most creative minister-theologians. This is from American biblical scholar, Roy Hoover:

"Those who insist upon the unaltered retention of traditional forms of religious understanding and language and who retreat from the challenge posed by the actual world after Galileo want to direct the Christian community into the confines of a sacred grotto, an enclosed, religiously defined world that is brought completely under the control of scripture and tradition; and they want to turn the ordained clergy into antiquities dealers." The Fourth R, Jan. – Feb. 2004

Gretta Vosper and courageous clergy who tell the truth are our last hope for a faith that will have any integrity. You may not agree with the approach that Gretta and West Hills United Church are taking. We will not agree on one clear approach to theology in this time. Agreement isn't the point. The point is not to punish voices and force people to mouth a wooden formula created in a pre-modern world.

We need ministers and theologians to experiment and to try out new ways of being church. We need ministers and theologians to articulate new ways of doing good in our world. Both our denominations have strong commitments to social justice and ethics. That is the heart of the church. Diana Butler Bass, author of *Christianity After Religion* quotes Harvey Cox:

"Faith is resurgent while dogma is dying. The spiritual, communal, and justice-seeking dimensions of Christianity are now its leading edge....A religion based on subscribing to mandatory beliefs is no longer viable." p. 109-110.

West Hills United Church and Rev. Gretta Vosper are Christianity's leading edge. I hope you will consider the larger picture as you reflect on this particular situation. Once we start down the road of silencing creative clergy, then all clergy begin to run scared. Once we do ministry from a context of fear, the love vanishes.

This is an exciting time. The world is watching The United Church of Canada, a denomination that Rev. Gretta Vosper loves and serves. May your church be a leader in exploring a faith for a 21st century mind.

Sincerely,

Rev. John Shuck

G'day Gretta,

Today at the Common Dreams4 Conference in Brisbane the following Greeting of Support was approved with acclamation. We hope that you, Scott, and members of the West Hill United Congregation will be able to feel the love and hugs which accompany it.

Please copy and distribute to all as you see fit.

Warm regards,

RAEH ... Rev Rex A E Hunt

Past Chair, Common Dreams Conference of Religious Progressives Australia/South Pacific (2006-2013)

Richard Carter

Chair, Common Dreams Conference of Religious Progressives Australia/South Pacific (2014 -)

MESSAGE /GREETING OF SUPPORT

That the Common Dreams4 Conference meeting in Brisbane, Australia, offers its love and pastoral support to Gretta Vosper, Scott Kearns, and the Congregation of West Hill United Church, during these stressful and challenging times...

At this time I have decided to discontinue my monthly PAR contribution to the Ponoka United Church due to my disagreement with the United Church of Canada's treatment of Rev. Gretta Vosper. I have made this decision by myself, without encouragement from Rev. Vosper or any other member of the United Church, and without their prior knowledge.

Much like Rev. Vosper, "the United Church of Canada [...] taught me to wrestle with the concept of god." I believe I can assume with fairly high accuracy it was not my minister's intention that I identify as an atheist. That is however what happened and I am grateful.

Some months after I started to identify with atheism I was delighted to learn of Rev. Vosper, a United Church minister halfway across the country who, like myself, was an atheist. I became even more certain that the United Church of Canada deserved my support. But no sooner did I learn of Rev. Vosper than I learned she was undergoing a "review". I have followed the proceedings of this review with great interest - and disappointment.

I realize that discontinuing my admittedly small contribution will not have any direct impact on the United Church. However, I have decided to do this on principle: if the United Church does not wish to support atheists, then the church should not expect our support.

It seems that every issue of the United Church Observer states that we need to find out how to increase attendance in churches and why people are leaving the church. In spite of Rev. Vosper being somewhat unorthodox, she is successful. While her methods may not be the only way to run a successful church, I think they are good ones. Instead of finding Rev. Vosper unsuitable, I think we should learn from her. We should be so lucky here in Ponoka if our weekly attendance was that of West Hill's.

I hope the general council will find that Rev. Vosper should remain a United Church minister.

Sincerely,

Graham Boyes

Regarding Moderator Jordan Cantwell's comment concerning "those in ministry leadership who have committed to teach and to preach the faith tradition of the church", I as an ordained (and now retired) minister of the United Church respectfully disagree. I did indeed commit to teach and preach out of the faith traditions of the church, but that is NOT the same as teaching and preaching those traditions. Like many, including both clergy and lay, I have experienced life as an on-going spiritual journey. The traditions of the United Church have nurtured and guided that journey in many ways, for which I have been and remain deeply grateful, but they have not circumscribed that journey. Rather, they have been my springboard for new explorations, now wonderings and wanderings, and new growth. That process continues. Today I think of myself as a "non-theistic follower of Jesus of Nazareth." Tomorrow, those words might receive some modification, or they might not. Like all spiritual journeys, the path of my journey is made known in the walking. I do not feel in any way unfaithful to my vows or my church. My "bottom line," to use the modern vernacular, is really very simple: either the United Church is big enough to continue to hold Gretta Vosper in its ordained ranks, or it is not big enough to hold me. It is my deep hope and prayer that I will continue to share the honorific of "ordained clergy" with Gretta. The alternative would be that neither of us carry it, and that would sadden me beyond words.

-- (Rev.) Mac Campbell

Lake George, NB

Sunday, 9 October 2016

**OPEN LETTER TO: REVEREND JORDAN CANTWELL, MODERATOR,
UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA**

Dear Rev. Cantwell,

I shall make the presumption that you have read an article in the October 19 issue of the Toronto Star, by Rosie DiManno, whose journalism I esteem. She entitled her thoughtful piece, "I can't believe in an atheist minister." I recognize that she addresses a serious issue with the United Church; I am writing to you to say that I, a retired lover of the arts and education - - and one who was baptized eighty years ago, by immersion at the age of 13, have lived a full life of education, reflection and involvement with the urges of humanity. The appearance and substance of DiManno's article at this critical time has persuaded me that I must finally admit to myself that I, too, am an atheist.

We need not split hairs over words and definitions in the old religious/academic ways; Rosie DiManno summarizes her case beautifully: "Churches are ipso facto in the God business." I reverse her words of attention demand: What? Wait! Of course the churches of today centre on the promotion of "the God business." However, without people, there is no "God business" and it was she, in this same article who reminded us of "the shrinking number of churchgoers as membership has dropped from 11 million in 1962 to under half a million"

Her remarks sent this retired researcher to the Internet. I am literally astounded by the number of available articles that have recorded and described the wide scale spreading of our Western European heritage of gradual liberalization that included measures of faith, church attendance and degrees of belief in a supernatural God. Even church buildings across the West are gradually disappearing! Interestingly, I found no comparative references to church and civil marriages, the frequency of which I have observed over the past decade. That matrimony and the blessings of church ceremony should have declined must surely be observed with some remorse.

My Internet search also found that the Globe and Mail published a series of five articles:

“Canada marching from religion to secularization” by Michael Valpy and Joe Friesen, commencing on Friday, December 10, 2010. Six years ago!

An acquaintance of mine has said that “an atheist minister is an oxymoron.” Not so. I do not know Gretta Vosper; I have not met her. However, I understand that the evidence collected by United Church authorities in relation to her case demonstrates to a high degree that she ministers to her parishioners most satisfactorily. Surely the United Church of Canada has unconsciously, but bravely, so far, brought to the world a beacon; a person and a method that is antithetical to the trend that has been publically identified for so many years. The task is that great: The world needs Gretta Vosper to show us what she has learned about ministering in this new climate. It is here; it will not be going away. As one who cares, I urge this church to continue on its trailblazing mission.

Most sincerely,

Garnet McDiarmid,

C.c. Gretta Vosper, Toronto Star, Editorial Department

Dr. McDiarmid is Professor Emeritus, retired Chair of the Department of Curriculum, Ontario Institute for Studies in Education, Graduate School, University of Toronto.

I wanted to take a moment

to let the West Hill community know that I am holding them in my heart during this challenging time. I am disheartened by the way the powers that be in the church have chosen to discern the suitability of a colleague in ministry, the effects it has on your community, as well as the broader church. I will continue to write letters in support of Greta and your community, and stay firmly grounded in offering whatever support I can from afar.

Marg Janick-Grayston

Dear People at West Hill,

Yesterday I had the privilege of hearing your minister The Rev. Gretta Vosper deliver a lecture at St. Andrew's on the Terrace in Wellington, New Zealand to a nearly packed lunch-time crowd.

As I expected her lecture was clear, helpful and really encouraging. I organise a reading group of lay people in a Wellington parish and we had read her books and I made contact to thank her. She responded with the suggestion that maybe we could hold a Skype discussion on the book 'Amen'. We did, and it was a thoroughly inspirational hour!

What I am impressed by is Gretta's honesty and her creativity. I have used one of her hymns: "Truth be told we're not alone", in the conduct of worship during a major planning exercise the local Parish was going through. Parishioners wanted that hymn to become the theme hymn for the entire two week planning process. I was aware of the context in which that hymn was written and could imagine it being a favourite hymn of yours. Now our 'Messy Church' group wants to use it as their theme hymn and I am hoping that Gretta may give us permission to use it in that way.

My point here is simply that the Kapiti Uniting Church (on the Kapiti Coast just north of Wellington New Zealand) (where I am one of the retired ministers who support the local church) are thinking of you and send you warmest greetings as you go through what will undoubtedly be a pain-filled time. In New Zealand our Maori people have a saying 'Kia Kaha' it means 'stand tall, be strong'. So to you, dear friends, and to your extraordinarily able pastor, resident theologian, creative minister filled with the spirit seen clearly in Jesus the prophet I say: Kia Kaha'.

Know there are people around the world who support you.

Kindest regards

Roger Wiig

Moderator Jordan and General Secretary Nora.

I have been in contented retirement for several years now and on the periphery of the church after my years “in the trenches”. From the sidelines I have watched, with growing concern, the church’s response to the ministry of Gretta Vosper. Concern has become consternation and I have been compelled to engage this issue.

The attached letter is self-explanatory. I drafted it with the help of several like-minded colleagues and then sent it to a few others on the roll of Maritime Conference whom I suspected would share our concern, inviting them to add their names to it. (It has leaked out a little since then and several others have asked to add their names.)

We have lived through this kind of uproar before and I have no wish to contribute to the forces of polarization that make these times so troubling and energy-sapping. Nonetheless, the response to my invitation to sign on to the attached has made me all the more determined to speak against the move to place Gretta on the DSL because of her beliefs – not to mention against what appears to be an unprecedented process. It has been very sobering for me to hear from clergy who are afraid of the precedent that will be set if that is to be the result. There is a chill being felt far more deeply than I had realized - not unlike the fear that gay colleagues felt earlier in our history.

Wishing you strength, grace and wisdom in your leadership,

Murray McFarlane

on behalf of those who have signed the attached

--

The Right Rev. Jordan Cantwell, Moderator, United Church of Canada

Nora Sanders, General Secretary, General Council

Greetings!

Grace and peace to you and members of the General Council in your work for this United Church of ours. Thank you for your ministry among us and your willingness to spend your energy in service of our denomination.

It is out of our concern for the life of the whole church that we want to offer our support for the West Hill congregation and their minister, Gretta Vosper, as they face the possibility of Gretta's exclusion from our communion.

We have all come to ministry in the United Church having professed our "essential agreement" with the articles of faith recognizing that the intent of that term was to allow us to take our place within a tradition without being constrained by time-bound doctrine.

We have been free to think critically about that tradition within a denomination that has encouraged diversity and inclusion. None of us have been able to engage that diversity without being changed – that has been part of the journey but we have not had to worry about expressing unorthodox views.

From time to time we have been challenged by those we have unsettled. Past moderator, Bill Phipps knows about that. There are many echoes of that episode in the church's response to Gretta Vosper.

Now, as then, the challenge for us is the same: to respond in love, to understand each other, and to nurture community.

You are fully aware that Gretta's congregation is not asking her to go – quite the contrary – they want her to stay and West Hill is obviously a place where they have found a spiritual home and formed a mutually supportive community. She and they want to stay within the United Church of Canada.

From our perspective, to remove her on the grounds of her beliefs would not only ignore and offend her very obviously effective leadership, it would offend our tradition of heterodoxy and inclusion and send a chilling message to our progressive colleagues all across the church.

We respectfully request that this letter be shared among those entrusted with the decision about her continuation in active ministry. We urge you and them to affirm, along with us, that our church is big enough to embrace her ministry.

The Rev. Brett Anningson, Marysville-Penniac , NB, Chaplain at UNB , Maritime Conference

The Rev. Steve Berube, Riverview, NB. Maritime Conference

The Rev. Beverley Burlock (retired) Maritime Conference

The Rev. Val Chongva (Retired) Maritime Conference

The Rev. T. D. Cleveland-Thompson, Halifax, NS, Maritime Conference

Carolyn Crowell, Bedford United, Maritime Conference

The Rev. Mac Campbell (Retired), Maritime Conference

The Rev. Alan Darby (Retired) Maritime Conference

The Rev, Betty Darby (Retired) Maritime Conference

The Rev. Kenley MacNeil (retired) Maritime Conference

The Rev. Brian McIntosh, Bloordale United, Etobicoke, Ontario

The Rev. Jane Doull, St. Croix Presbytery, Maritime Conference

Dianna Doucet, Central United , Moncton, Maritime Conference

The Rev. Bob Jones (retired) Maritime Conference

The Rev. Emily Kierstead (Retired) Maritime Conference

Lloyd MacLean, Music United, Minister of Music, Green Hill-Alma, NS, Maritime Conference

Gwen MacLean, Green Hill-Alma United, NS, Maritime Conference

The Rev. Jim MacDonald, Central United, Moncton, NB,

The Rev. Joanne McFadden, Shelburne, Maritime Conference

The Rev. Murray McFarlane (retired) Past President , Maritime Conference

The Rev. Clifford Moase (retired) Minister Emeritus, Wilmot United, Maritime Conference

The Rev. Don Murray (Retired) Maritime Conference

Dr. Homer C. Noble, Maritime Conference

The Rev. Leslie Robinson (retired) Maritime Conference

Ian R. Stewart, Fredericton Maritime Conference

The Rev. Bob Stevens (retired) Maritime Conference

The Rev. Gil Todd (retired) Maritime Conference

The Rev. Linda Winton (retired) Valley Presbytery, Maritime Conference.

October 19, 20016

October 11, 2016

TO WHOM IT MAY CONCERN:

I submit the following as an official request to have my name removed from every official list of United Church of Canada clergy, and to have my name placed on the Discontinued Service list.

This is partly because of what the church is currently doing to gretta vosper and her congregation, but even more broadly because that is a clear indication of an even larger problem. The United Church has lost its way. I am no longer proud to be associated with it, and have been more and more reluctant to identify myself as one of its ministers.

This is not the ambiance which attracted me in the first place and it certainly isn't what I was ordained into. Never EVER was I subjected, in any of my pre-ordination interviews over the several years, to such an intensive and excessive interrogation as gretta faced before the subcommittee, which basically amounted to a heresy trial. (Since when was 'right beliefs', an ancient persecuted offense, a UCC priority?) I did not become a minister who had to swear I believed in a list of set vows that were unalterable and infallible, and sign to that.

Without growth there is stagnation. It seems the United Church itself is settling into that state. And any ministers who have not grown in their learning and thinking since their seminary days and ordination have not kept up with continuing education as most other professionals are required to, and have failed to be good leaders. *"...by this time you ought to be teachers, (but) you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! Anyone who lives on milk, being still an infant, is not acquainted with the teaching about righteousness" - doing what is right, justice, vs. doing the opposite, wickedness)* (Hebrews 5: 12-13)

There have been threats of splits in the church before - when we chose to ordain women, to support anti-apartheid in South Africa, to accept, ordain and marry gays. The church never gave in to those, some of which were more dire in their

seriousness and severity. We were able to 'accept' the Renewal Fellowship and Community of Concern. Moderator Bill Phipps said Jesus wasn't divine, causing a media uproar and frenzy (they do love the scent of a scandal), but he wasn't subjected to an inquisition or defrocking.

Being of a legal bent, both the originator of the document, that resulted in this investigation of gretta, and the current General Secretary are thus focusing on the legal letter of the law, which is so NOT Jesus. In fact, gretta is being treated the same as the 'religious authorities' of his day treated Jesus, who called them out on putting law over compassion. In fact Jesus called them a brood of vipers, snakes and hypocrites for doing exactly that. Maybe it's time to re-read Matthew chapter 23. And don't forget, Jesus was right there in the midst of all those the rest of the world had rejected, abused, despised, exiled to the margins, embracing, respecting and including them. In his parables, Jesus even used some as good examples to follow.

Jesus didn't insist on people 'believing' anything - in fact he told the rich young ruler who had kept ALL the laws to a T, that what he lacked was how he cared about and for others around him - go and sell all that you have and give it away to those in need. With the story of the sheep and the goats, it was also all about how vulnerable people were treated. The Hebrew scriptures repeatedly say the same thing - a nation (one could say denomination) will be judged on how it treats the "*least of these*". Furthermore, Jeremiah talks about a time when teaching about God will no longer be required, because all God's desires (& characteristics we claim God has) will be written on/in people's hearts. The Bible is all about doing and living, not about 'believing'. Even the understanding of that word's meaning has become compromised and corrupted.

Ever since the later union with Evangelical United Brethren, it seems the United Church has been gradually slipping into a more conservative perspective. We are no longer the open and exploring, the inclusive and progressive denomination we once were, emphasizing social justice issues, which drew so many people, including me, to it. How many of the EUB clergy or those seeking admission from other denominations were extensively questioned as to their openness to what was then United Church policy? It was my experience that those I encountered still had their old theology. And now the United Church is willing to accept a request from anyone, even with no prior involvement with church, Christianity, let alone the United Church. No longer do they even need to be associated for a few years with a congregation, where they would have been exposed to United Church thinking,

and be known by United Church members. Where is the accountability there? Where is the theological grilling and set requirements of 'beliefs'?

Words are a serious concern in any communication. And communicating anything religious and spiritual in words is even more complicated. For one thing, the meaning of words changes - over time, with translation, from culture to culture. Definitions can even become corrupted, distorted. ANY word connected with "God" is both limited and limiting. Therefore, demanding there be only one single acceptable understanding is slipping into idolatry. The church has not taught well the concept of metaphor over literal.

As I have experienced within my own congregations and with others, many, if not most or even all, of our religious words come with so much baggage and both mis-information and mis-understanding, along with bad translations and interpretations, that they are obstacles, driving people away. Some people, like Spong and Borg, believe the words can be redeemed. But for many that has not worked at all. So now others are working at replacing new less-loaded words in an attempt to meet those many who are desperately seeking something with spiritual substance and meaning. If that meets their needs, resulting in them then living the kind of compassionate, caring, open, inclusive lives Jesus taught, is that not a good thing? Something to be applauded and encouraged, rather than attacked and deplored - exiled from our very midst? Are we not to be "*known by our fruits*"?

The United Church has supposedly grown, so we proclaim anyway, from union in 1925 along a continuum to a current concept of Holy Mystery. Surely gretta is within that Holy Mystery. Or should be included. She is not trying to convert anyone, nor insisting all follow or even agree with her. She is 'breathing out goodness' -- even to, I might add, her accusers.

The UCC has missed out on an incredibly important and crucial teachable moment here. Instead of going against our own principles and attacking and excluding, the church should have taken the amazing opportunity to teach the general population and media, as well as its own members (many of whom apparently badly need it too), educating them that it is not just a choice only between God or no-God. That the word God is but a mere feeble attempt to 'explain' something beyond description. That God is broader than any word we can come up with and far broader than any concept we can conceive, thus there are many, many, many ways to think about God, some of which might even include not using the word God at all! That the word atheist also has other, broader and deeper understandings than

merely no-God. What a tragic loss and waste of such an incredibly wide open opportunity.

While gretta might feel betrayed by her Church (as do I), she's not the only one being hurt. You are insulting her whole congregation. As well as all those other clergy and congregations who have been quietly teaching and living the same things. You are also grossly insulting and turning away all those others with no current religious affiliation who are searching for a place where they can feel at home spiritually. No more is the United Church of Canada the place to go and be accepted. We used to talk about 'living with the questions', but now, no more questions, no more seeking, we too now act as if we have The Answer. This smacks of hubris and a serious lack of humility. The process itself, which was both exclusive and secretive, was a disgrace. No Biblical justice here, just law enforcement & punishment. No "ever-flowing stream" either (Amos 5:21-24).

I would remind you of what Gamaliel, a well respected religious authority of his time, said to the people out to get 'the apostles'. (Acts 5: 34-35, 38-39) "*Consider carefully what you propose to do to these people....I tell you, keep away from them and let them alone; because if this plan or this undertaking is of human origin, it will fail (as he had mentioned others had). But if it is of God, you will not be able to overthrow them – in that case you may even be found fighting against God.*" No matter what definition of God or whether that word is even used.

In Judaism (& Jesus was a Jew), teaching and learning thrived on controversy and debate (or dialogue as gretta keeps requesting). The sages taught that "*every argument deserved a hearing, for one could never know whether future generations might not discover truth in the minority view, as well as the majority*".

When I was first at seminary, I remember thinking "I'm not the first person to be taught this stuff. Why have I NEVER heard even a vague hint of any of it from any of the ministers I have encountered, met or known?" Why indeed. I am beginning to think it was at least partly because of fear. Very sad, since by far the most common Biblical 'commandment' is "*Fear not*".

Well, I am sick at heart and tired of being in a denomination that is ruled at least in part by fear, and being part of a clergy that keeps silent because of fear. Some years ago I decided I would never again read any scripture, say any creed or prayer, perform any ritual, preach or teach anything I could not do with integrity. I made no public announcement, and my congregations likely never realized the 'radical'

changes. However, I received positive feedback and comments that they appreciated the honesty and openness, and at least some found it liberating, refreshing and soul-nourishing.

This then is my further act of integrity. I can no longer be silent and secretive. Especially when doing so leaves my colleague and classmate abandoned and hanging out to dry like some sacrificial lamb. When my denomination has betrayed its principles, thus also betraying me and negating my 'calling'. Again the cry goes up "*Let my people go*".

With deep regret I am telling you I am leaving. Remove my name from your rolls.

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