

Toronto's 'atheist minister' to face church trial

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August 10, 2015

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TORONTO (RNS) An ordained minister of Canada's largest Protestant denomination is facing dismissal because she is an atheist.

Gretta Vosper, spiritual leader of West Hill United Church in suburban Toronto, made her God-denying views known as far back as 2001. She stayed on course a few years later when she ended the practice of reciting the Lord's Prayer, and some two-thirds of her congregants quit.

Her 2008 book, *With or Without God*, alienated some churchgoers anew.

Vosper, known as the "atheist minister," is back in the news now that a church court will soon begin a review process to determine if she should be removed from the pulpit.

"I don't believe in the god called God," Vosper told The Canadian Press wire service this month. "Using the word gets in the way of sharing what I want to share."

Asked in a March *Toronto Star* interview whether she believes that Jesus was the Son of God, she said, "I don't think Jesus was."

Things came to a head earlier this year after she wrote an open letter objecting to a prayer a fellow minister had written following the *Charlie Hebdo* massacre in Paris. Vosper said the prayer should have acknowledged that belief in God could trigger extremism.

The United Church of Canada's Toronto executive began looking into Vosper's fitness as a minister. In May, the denomination's top administrative body, the General Council, laid out the procedure for determining whether Vosper was true to her ordination vows, which included affirming a belief in "God: Father, Son, and Holy

Spirit.”

“This is the first time an ordained minister has been asked to confirm her vows,” said David Wilson, editor of the *United Church Observer*.

Vosper, 57, was ordained in 1993 and joined the Toronto church in 1997.

The 70 or so congregants who remain in her church are said to be staunch supporters.

Founded in 1925, the United Church is known for its liberal leanings and social justice activism.

The denomination has been closing churches at a rate of more than one a week—59 in 2013, according to Wilson.