

## **“Big tent, small chapel”: United Church finally defrocks atheist minister**

**By David MacKenzie**

An official Interview Committee report is now complete. And the committee has recommended that the Rev. Gretta Vosper— the self-described “theological non-realist” (atheist) minister of the United Church of Canada— is to be defrocked, placed on the Church’s official “discontinued service list.”

Well, I know how that feels— except that, in my case, it was the voluntary thing to do. Biblically, I couldn’t walk with the United Church anymore. And, once I came to this conclusion, the process for me was relatively swift.

In Vosper’s case, however, stretching back even prior to 2008 when she banned the Lord’s Prayer in her church, the broader question might still be: Has the disciplinary process for this minister taken so long because, sadly, these are days of profoundly stubborn, intellectual dishonesty? Politically, do we now consider professional duplicity to be a given?

In the 18th Century, many Unitarian ministers chose to leave their Christian congregations because they understood themselves to have rejected Christian doctrine. Some two hundred years later, though, there is no less doctrinal criticism, but far less doctrinal honesty.

The Rev. Vosper is not Christian. Vosper is an atheist. Nevertheless, her ecclesiastical saga somehow manages to fit these progressive times like old slippers.

The United Church of Canada was ratified by an act of Parliament in 1925; arguably, no other Canadian denomination is as much a religious reflection of the broader liberal culture. Hence, in a day when social progressives define tangible gender as “merely a social construct”, we should not be surprised to find a pastor who describes the intangible God as a “construct” as well.

If it isn’t culturally unusual for liberals to masquerade as conservatives, for marxists to be part of the establishment, or for one to waltz into any old bathroom on the basis of one’s feelings today, why should it be shocking that a minister could be a pastor all while denying every major Christian tenet— right on down to the attempted repudiation of theism itself? Maybe, it’s just “Shania” theology— the equivalent of “Man, I feel like a woman!”

“Sheep! I’m truly a wolf!”

No— we should not be shocked. On matters of incongruous identity, social progressives are King— or “Qu/ing”, or whatever!

What is equally predictable, as well, is to hear the minority report from the Interview committee expressing their regrets at Vosper’s potential dismissal: “(T)he United Church should be a big tent and, rather than defining the boundaries of that tent, [should] consider instead how far from the centre Ms. Vosper really is.”

To these “tabernacle tears”, we may also add the sniffing of radical American Episcopalian Bishop John Spong's official sentiment:

“If the United Church of Canada is not broad enough to embrace this creative and unique pastor then this church that I once admired so much has sounded its own death knell.”

Well, John ought to know about institutional death and dying— his singular tenure as bishop was responsible for a membership decline in the Newark Diocese by between 42 and 44 per cent.

Yet, this column shouldn't dwell upon mere statistics— that would smack too much of reality. Rather, we might ask: if Spong's idea of church is so doctrinally grand in its accommodation, then why did it become so insignificant in real time?

Why is “big tent” so increasingly “small chapel”?

It's no secret. Radical disciples of diversity often turn big doctrinal domes into utterly meaningless homes. Fabrics stretch until the Emperor is naked. Although social progressives increasingly treat “binaries”— like men and women, theist and atheist— with cosmopolitan indifference, the church of everything always becomes the cult of nothing.

And belief means something. It always has. To pretend doctrinal differences are irrelevant is to stop analyzing— to stop thinking like a human.

As Chesterton once reminded his readers, “trees have no dogmas; turnips are singularly broad-minded.”

One wouldn't want to overplay this turn of events— that, incredibly, the United Church should have taken a creedal stand. They still tend to strain out gnats while swallowing camels. They still act like the NDP at prayer. Theirs is still a dog-eat-dogma world.

Yet, by a vote of 19-4, one committee said something significant. They looked to their roots and not their rutabaga. They decided they were theists.

As steeped in theological and moral permissiveness as mainline churches have tended to become in Canada, one committee has actually implied that even Jello may have a cutting edge.

This may be better news than we realize.