

Toronto Conference sub-Executive Meeting, September 18, 2016 receiving the report of the Ministry Personnel Review Committee

Transcript of Presentation by Gretta Vosper

Gretta Vosper

Thank you for gathering today to have this conversation. I think that it is important for us to reflect on the report that came out of the Interview Committee. When I went into that room to have that conversation, I went in with a spirit of collaboration. I did not go in expecting an interrogation and I'm ... expecting that that will continue today. I am expecting that a collaborative approach and a dialogue approach will take place.

I wanted to speak a little bit about how we got into this room today, those of you who have come as spectators, those of you who are members of the sub-Executive, and those of you who have come to speak. We come from a variety of trajectories to this room.

Some of us have been life-long members of The United Church of Canada, born into a denomination that, itself, was born less than a century ago. But born into a progressive understanding of theology, of scholarship, of welcoming a diverse and eclectic group of people within its walls and under its roof so that it could be about the work of transforming society and making it a community of love, of justice and of compassion. So, many of us have come through that.

Some of us have joined the church from other Christian denominations. But there are many in this room who have come who had no denomination, no Christian relationship, no relationship with any faith tradition whatsoever, who've felt the need for a community that would call them to those things that the United Church speaks that it is about – to compassion, to justice, to living in right relationship. I welcome you to this space, to the court that is formed here today, those of you for whom this [kind of gathering] is yet a strange thing but who have come here through West Hill United Church and what it has offered to you.

Throughout the period of this review, it has been a challenge to remain effective as a minister while trying to respond to the many needs and concerns of the review itself. And so, on occasion I have conflated things that I have had to do in order that I'd only have to do them once. We have been, over the course of the last several weeks at West Hill, looking at the attitudes of mindfulness and walking our way through those attitudes. Ironically, last Sunday, the attitude we explore was Acceptance, had been laid out several weeks before and the readings chosen some time before but they fit the nature of what was happening that week. And so, because I don't shoot birds and don't advocate the shooting of birds, I will cast two seeds with one hand today and I will share with you my thoughts on this week's attitude, this week's mindfulness attitude and that is Generosity.

I do this because I believe that that is the tradition of The United Church of Canada and I call you to generosity.

I have with me the reading that will be shared with the church this Sunday, a reading that comes from a book by Rebecca Solnit called *A Paradise Built in Hell*. Rebecca studied disasters beginning with the earthquake and fire in San Francisco in 1906 and ending with Hurricane Katrina in 2006. She found that in every instance the first thing that people do is reach out to one another, to hold one another in care, to ignore whatever barriers may have existed between them, whether cultural, racial, or socio-economic, to just leave those behind and to just be with one another as individuals. And so her book is a profound contribution to who we can be as individuals in society.

This is actually quoted from Krista Tippett's *On Being*, a conversation that Solnit had with Tippett on the radio about that book.

And I think of that as kind of this funny way the earthquake shakes you awake, and then that's sort of the big spiritual question. How do you stay awake? How do you stay in that deeper consciousness of that present-mindedness, that sense of non-separation, and compassion, and engagement, and courage, which is also a big part of it, and generosity. People are not selfish and greedy. So ... the other question is why has everything we've ever been told about human nature misled us about what happens in these moments? And what happens if we acknowledge, as I think people in the kind of work that neuropsychologists and the Dalai Lama's research projects and economists are beginning to say, ... what if ... everything we've been told about human nature is wrong, and we're actually very generous, communitarian, altruistic beings who are distorted by the system we're in, but not made happy by it? What if we can actually be better people in a better world?

And so I am framing my words today in terms of earthquakes, the earthquakes that happened, that brought the United Church into being, that have taken place during the history of the United Church and recognize that the moment that we are in right now is a moment of an earthquake.

Perhaps the very first earthquake in The United Church of Canada came about before it was even formed. When the three denominations coming into union could not agree what would happen after union. What would happen with that statement of faith that had been written in 1908 and that was going to be embraced by the new denomination in 1925? What would happen to those who had made ordination vows, who had accepted statements of faith that were not reflected in that document? It was a quake of a serious sort and one that threatened to undermine the entire concept of union and not allow it to take place. And then one individual from the Congregationalists, a denomination that had come into being from the Anglican Church, a dissenting denomination, had an idea and offered the idea of essential agreement to the church. [It] meant that all those clergy that had come in from denominations that were joining the union would have the privilege of carrying their own beliefs into union, seeing them recognized, perhaps not fully, but honoured the way they were brought in from their traditions. Essential agreement was born.

What happened with essential agreement was that it quickly allowed us to also ordain people who also could say "I hold to that, but there are some issues here." Because already in 1925 those who founded the church knew that those statements of faith were already at question. There were already people who came into union who questioned the reality of a god with beingness and spoke of a god as metaphor. And so already, that conversation was beginning to rumble under the surface and continue. Because of that, the United Church could find, as we have on so many issues since, a common ground on how to be with one another, not necessarily what we believe, but how to be: to call ourselves to justice, tinged and woven together with love; to call ourselves to compassion; to call ourselves to a greater vision.

And so one of the first things that the United Church did, following on another denomination in the United States, was to ordain women. Did we really want women in leadership? Has it not just been downhill ever since? Richard Holloway put that question to the Church of Scotland because he saw that that was the stitch that, taken out of biblical inerrancy, if you take that stitch out and women are ordained, the whole piece starts to unravel, and so perhaps we, women, have been the beginning of that.

But we looked at that, and we looked at the challenges, and we looked at the losses, and the costs that would have to be paid, and we said, these are important costs for us to assume, for us to embrace, because it is right that women should be allowed to lead in this diverse and great church as we challenge the nation to embrace a new understanding of Christianity.

Shortly after that another earthquake hit in the form of the Second World War. Japanese Canadians were being lodged in internment camps and refused [permission] to move freely throughout community. The United Church recognized the earthquake, the shame inherent in that and it quickly spoke against that practice at that time.

Shortly after that, they took a step back and looked at the residential schools that they had inherited at union. In 1949, they began closing those schools, finally recognizing that the tragedy that they had been for First Nations and indigenous peoples and their heritage across the decades.

We stepped up and spoke loudly and clearly about universal health care in the 1950s, recognizing that it was a right that all Canadians should share. We weren't popular about that, but we asked ourselves "What is generosity if not allowing other people health?" We stepped into that work and we did it proudly.

And then I was born. (laughter) It's not funny. I was!

I was born in the year that a statement was agreed upon that would guide the creation of *The New Curriculum*. Ten years before John [A. T.] Robinson's book [*Honest to God*] was published, a committee started to look at ways that we could bring contemporary Christian scholarship around the Bible, around Christology, around theology, could bring it to the people in the pews. Because we recognized that even in 1925 there was a gap between what academia talked about in terms of theology and what the people in the pews talked about, that gap was widening every day. And the UCC did not want that gap to be there. So in 1952 they began. In 1958 they set the parameters. In 1964 the first book was published, *The Way and the Word*, written by Donald Mathers, Principal of Queen's Theological College at the time. I went to school with his sons and I knew how he was treated and the difficulty it was for him to absorb some of the vitriol that he received for being so involved in that work. But his work was illuminated by people like Harvey Cox whose work in *The Secular City*, noted that we couldn't go forward with exclusively myth and symbol. We needed to build a tradition that taught the values that were inherent in our tradition and needed to be made available to all. That as long as we continued to truck in these fine-tuned and symbolic rituals and in the myths that were myths but not understood to be by the people, that we were sidelining ourselves from what full community could be.

And at the same time, John A. T. Robinson wrote his work, *Honest To God*, and talked about a non-theistic understanding of God, challenging the church around the world to stop using the word "god" for at least ten years (*sic*)* so that we could, if we were going to reclaim it, by the time it was reintroduced it, it would have such a different meaning that people wouldn't recognize it from before. That's when I was born.

Shortly after that Canada was asked to welcome draft dodgers [fleeing the Vietnam draft] from the United States and its initial reaction was that it could not do that. But it quickly changed its opinion about draft dodgers and there are now, many of them, welcomed, contributing members of Canadian society.

And then the question, "Can a woman's name really go on the ballot for the position of Moderator? Can we tolerate that? Will we survive that kind of change in the United Church? We ordained them but, seriously ... ? Seriously ...?" Yes! And Lois Wilson became the first female Moderator in The United Church of Canada.

Not long after that, "In God's Image" was published. A study that looked at issues of sexuality. A study that looked at issues such as abortion and a woman's right to decide what happens with her own body. It was so cutting edge that people who wrote that got vitriolic mail and were torn down and derided in Presbytery meetings and in public for having brought that work forward.

We found our way toward a First Nations' Apology, the 30th anniversary of which we just celebrated.

And we worked shoulder to shoulder to dismantle apartheid in South Africa.

Every single time the idea of generosity could be lifted up out of that situation because we had put it there. We had challenged that generosity be part of the story, part of the reality.

The United Church of Canada, I often say when I am speaking around the world, I often describe the United Church of Canada as a table, a table that has a number of voices around it, diverse voices, diverse theologies, diverse social justice understandings, diverse perspectives on the environment, on the economy, on politics. But there is always one empty chair at that table. and the United Church, with courage, has invited the people from whom they least want to hear to sit down in that chair and they have emboldened themselves to listen to that person to the truth that that person has shared with them about sexuality, about indigenous rights about the economy about diverse issues, about gender identity. About ... anything. Welcome. Sit down with us. Let us hear your story. Let our hearts be broken by what it is you have suffered and may we find our way to generosity.

And so we have continued to change.

The United Church, over the past 15 years has watched a transformation take place in a congregation. In 2001, when I preached that sermon totally deconstructing God, quite unsuspecting that I was going to do that, and I was embraced by my congregational members like never before (I'm sure they thought I was having a complete breakdown). But my board sat down with me to discuss our pastoral relationship - the bond that had brought us together - to determine together if that bond had been broken, whether I had compromised the strength of that bond. They boldly said, "Let's go there. Let's find what might be beyond the language that ties us to a theological perspective that is not shared with those out there."

And why we did that was because The United Church of Canada had been, for generations, the voice that mitigated the struggle for the social fabric of community, the social fabric of a nation. The United Church is why Canada has the social democratic values that it does, because over and again it stepped in and spoke truth that needed to be heard by all Canadians.

We have abdicated our responsibility to Canadians by not standing strong in that argument for social mores, for the centre of our community. And we have done that because we have believed that belief was what brought us and held us together. That theological doctrine and dogma is what we can represent best in our Sunday gatherings and in our annual meetings. That if we tie ourselves to the archaic language of long ago, that that will help us retain our understanding of who we are.

But we are mistaken. That is not who we are. We aren't people of a theological pedigree. We are people of a pedigree of generosity. We have lived that out every single time an earthquake has hit us. Every single time we have had the opportunity to speak truth into a moment of fear and loss and uncertainty, we have spoken about generosity and we have been those people.

Early in this millennium, maybe about 2005, 2006, Reginald Bibby started looking [again] into what was happening to religion in Canada, what was happening specifically to Christianity in Canada. He is the "go to" sociologist who tells us what we look like. And he knew that religion was declining and he knew it was declining fast. But his latest studies showed that we could build again, that there were religious groups that were going to grow. It was very clear that statistics showed that, just as it always had, it would continue into the future. The size of a Christian church was going to be proportional to those who were accepting those who were immigrants to Canada. In the 1950s and the 1960s that was white Christians who were coming from Europe and from Protestant countries. That has shifted and changed.

The United Church looked at that trajectory that Reginald Bibby identified and said, you know we need to go in a direction that would welcome immigrants. But you know, they made a mistake about that. They felt that that meant that we needed to move in a more conservative direction; we needed to embrace a more conservative theology.

I think that if they had flipped that graph [of decline] upside down they would have seen the truth of what was happening since the beginning of the millennium. They would have seen that although few people would acknowledge or admit that they didn't have any belief in god or that they didn't have a connection with a church, that though many people at the beginning of the century weren't really open about sharing that, less so down south than up here, that curve was growing at an incredible rate.

What an opportunity the United Church might have had if had recognized that if we moved one quarter of a step from where we were and we focused ourselves and poured ourselves into generosity, which has been our code for everything we ever touched, if we moved one quarter of a step into generosity and we let go of some of that language that we used that keeps us apart from people, whether we are someone who believes strongly in god as a being who intervenes in the natural affairs and in our lives or whether we don't, we could leave hold of that language. We could leave hold of that language and we could bring people into community that spoke about what underneath we shared, no matter what our beliefs were, that spoke about generosity and compassion and coming together to learn how to live in right relationship with oneself, first, and with others, and with this planet. And rather than continuing to hemorrhage the numbers we had in the UCC, we might have made a difference. We might have not lost that struggle for the centre of our communities which we have now left to religious fundamentalists and libertarian relativists, a mix that can only create confusion and disorientation and trauma.

I come here today because I love the United Church. I have loved what it has stood for. I have loved what it has been. I love the people around me who have been nourished by it who have been trained within it, who have found their way beyond the boxes that we now find ourselves moving into. So I come with love but I come with lament. Lament mostly because this is the first opportunity that I have been able to talk with you that wasn't in response to a particular set of questions. Lament because you have never sat down and talked with these noble people who have carried this work no matter what the costs have been - and they have been great - and who have continued to move forward. I come with lament because the system, the process that has been created here allows for very little room.

And you need room. You need room for generosity. Not just in this room but in the church beyond us.

Julian Falconer

Chair, members of Conference Executive, my timer says 9 minutes left and that's scary if you give a lawyer 9 minutes so I want you to know that I am extremely grateful for your patience in allowing me to supplement what Reve. Vosper's said but I am aware of the fact that hearing from the lawyer's isn't really what this hearing is about. I'll try to be helpful rather than self-indulgent.

One of the documents that was made part of the record today came to you Rev. Allen last night at 6:47 p.m. and it is a email from Rev. Bill Wall, Retired Rev. Bill Wall. I asked Rev. Vosper this morning. I asked Gretta. I don't know why we do this stuff, so I asked Gretta this morning, "Do you know him?" She doesn't know him. She's never corresponded with him.

I find that interesting because the words in this email are just so striking. He is the past executive secretary of Saskatchewan conference for 15 years from 1985 – 2000. As recently as last night, this is what he wrote, "After carefully reading ..." And I'm picking pieces of this so please forgive me if it looks like I'm cherry picking but the gist of the entirety of this is part of the record and I encourage everyone to read the whole thing. "After carefully reading the report of the review committee, and other relevant materials, I'm convinced that the sub-executive is facing a decision that could substantially alter the future of the United Church of Canada. In addition to damaging the life of one of its more capable and committed ministers. Gretta has proved herself committed to principles the United Church has stood for over the course of its history." And he lists those principles: "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 herself."

Now, I am the least example of a religiously oriented and devoted person and so I don't want to in any way pretend that I am or that I have knowledge that I don't have. I want to be respectful of your devotion and the you have shown to your own church. I have had the honour of assisting the UC in a number of capacities over the years. I said this to the interview committee and I'm kind of honoured that they repeated the words several times. I've always been struck by the big tent that the United Church is. And I said that to the interview committee when I closed last time. But what struck me most was this letter because the way he puts it after describing Gretta as something that she doesn't claim for herself. "The decision facing you is whether to facilitate an unprecedented step, that of putting one of our ministers on trial for pushing the boundaries of theological thought. I trust you will ponder deeply the consequences of your decision and ask yourself how many ministers in the United Church could honestly reaffirm their vows for ordination, commissioning, or admission without the benefit of the essential agreement provision, a provision that for 91 years has provided ministers with some leeway in theological interpretation and personal integrity. This destructive and unjust process could stop here if you are willing to do what is necessary to stop it and I respectfully ask you to do just that."

Now, the recognition that Gretta Vosper has all of these things – an educated ministry, freedom of thought, compassion for those who suffer, and social justice – this sounds like the heart of your organization. As I said, I know very little and I mean to be respectful but I have to say this, you are a victim of your own essence, your openness, your fearlessness, your willingness to embrace critical debate is to be contrasted with the thought police of many religions. You're a victim of that now because you're engaged in it. I have to say that I worry, as an outsider, that I fear if you lose Gretta, I fear you will lose a piece of yourself far bigger than Gretta, far bigger than West Hill. I look at the report, a report where twenty percent of the members, where four of twenty-three, I'm not trying to make the numbers bigger, I'm not trying to do the lawyer thing, where four of twenty-three, twenty percent of that interview committee, saw what Gretta stood for, as they saw it, the same as many ministers and lay persons. Now you can agree or disagree with them but obviously this is a very principled debate for which there is no right or wrong answer.

Putting Gretta on trial isn't a way to have a principled debate. It's a way to ensure my kid goes to a college in the US, I suppose. It's the worst thing you can do to yourselves. I am the carpenter who's telling you, don't hire the carpenter. I'm the plumber who's telling you, don't hire the plumber. Don't reduce this to a piece of litigation. I have been in enough formal hearings. Some of the worst and most atrocious allegations. Some of the pettiest allegations. I have seen over the years a number of different matters tried by way of formal hearing. What is interesting about this one is it is one of the few times I will honestly tell you a hearing is a huge mistake. Dividing your church as you can see it doing it right now, isn't healthy. A hearing that decided that Gretta should no longer be a minister will not end the matter. It will actually start a much bigger fissure in your church, in your community. For what end? She is obviously a healthy part of your process. She contributes. She makes you healthy by recognizing the importance of debate and dialogue. She makes the point that you have created safety for ministers and congregations alike. You have created that safe space. Don't be afraid to embrace it now.

I'm not saying reject the Interview Committee outright if you feel that would go too far. Put it on hold. There's no rush. Put it over for a year. Structure a debate. You have heard, you have heard from the dissenting members, you have heard from extremely credible individuals such as Rev. Wall, but there are many more. It is within your power to adjourn this for one year, that is entertaining the recommendation for a hearing while you structure the debate that needs to take place.

Dialogue not discipline, is really recognizing that there are more than Gretta Vosper at stake here. And I understand the theory that your membership is in decline but I can't believe that a way to fix numbers is by becoming more closed, more dogmatic and less vital as a trade place for ideas. She represents ideas. She represents, actually, the essence what I thought the United Church was about. What interests me and I say this candidly, most of the cases I do, you will understand, the clients never help themselves. It's probably not a great idea they talk. I've never seen many clients in the stand make their case better by the time they leave the stand. I say that with all due respect to all of the clients I

deeply love. Gretta is an exception. When Gretta speaks, we all listen. There's a reason for that. Rev. Wall said it best. A true follower, deserving of the title even if she doesn't claim that for herself. Please don't lose sight, please don't lose sight of the opportunity here to embrace dialogue. This does not have to be a win/lose. This need not be a litigation paradigm. This needs to be a structured and open dialogue representative of who your church is. Thank you.

Audrey Brown, President, Toronto Conference

I do need to note that, as part of the United Church tradition we don't, ... we ask people to refrain from responding to speakers by clapping or by acting in any way. I appreciate your enthusiasm, but I did ask that you remain silent observers and would ask you to continue to do, or to begin to do that. I have a couple of questions for ... and these are on behalf of the sub-Executive.

Do you want to remain an ordained minister in The United Church of Canada?

Gretta Vosper

It would be a pleasure for me to serve The United Church of Canada that I have known and loved through my entire life and that has taught me how to live, and how to engage in the world and how to make a meaningful life and has helped me engage in the work of justice-making which I do and which I feel is a significant part of me. If this is not that church then I am not interested in remaining as a minister within it.

Audrey Brown

If I asked you, sort of, is that a why for you?

Gretta Vosper

A why?

Audrey Brown

If you would like to remain in the church that you feel that you have been in, so why would you like to?

Gretta Vosper

Because of the work that I do. Because this is the place where the gifts and skills that I have learned and honed over the years are best suited to the inspiration of others who can then use their gifts and skills in the world, in order to create beauty, to pursue truth, to live with goodness. It's the work that I do.

Audrey Brown

Given that The United Church of Canada identifies itself as a Christian church, how do you then propose to lead a community of faith?

Gretta Vosper

I have been leading a community of faith that has been growing out of the Christian tradition for the past 16 years. I've led the community for 20 years. Over the past 16, we have moved away from a language that is theologically exclusive. West Hill United Church in the 1980s underwent a building reconstruction in order to remove physical barriers. In the 1990s it underwent incredible study – in the late 80s, early 90s – in order to remove whatever gender language barriers were there. In the early 2000s, we began removing theological language barriers. We became an Affirming congregation in order to ensure that people knew that we had long since removed barriers to participation related to sexuality. And we continue to remove barriers. We are now looking at Sunday as a barrier – the format of the Sunday service, is that a

barrier to participation? If it is, we need to do something about it and we have sought to bring about programs to do that.

Audrey Brown

The Presbytery and the Conference, we've talked about support, supporting your congregation and you, what support would be helpful to you from Presbytery or Conference.

Gretta Vosper

Because I haven't felt a lot of support from Presbytery or Conference, I'm not sure what it is that you are asking me. Like what? I'm not sure what kind of support you're asking me

Audrey Brown

Its related to the recommendations from the process.

Gretta Vosper

Oh. Okay.

Julian Falconer

Can I speak to that?

It is extremely difficult to, in one paragraph, to say "You are unsuitable to continue in your calling," and in the next paragraph, "What supports you need?" And I think you're experiencing this reaction again. It creates a sort of conundrum that doesn't make a lot of sense. It doesn't mean that the intention isn't there or that the spirit of generosity isn't there in the sense that people worry for Gretta and for the congregation but ...

So I think the problem is, in the paradigm of a trial, and, please, I am now taking it completely out of context. So the accused is faced with a serious charge. The jury says, "Guilty" and then right after looks at the accused and says "Can we do anything for you today?" And so the challenge is, I think the discussion about supports, or my suggestion, my respectful suggestion is, that it should happen on another day because it is close to impossible to sincerely address one's mind to it when you are in the middle of being on trial.

Gretta Vosper

That said, there is something I would like to say and I don't want to mitigate the support that individuals who are members of the Presbytery and the Conference have offered to me that has been significant and ongoing. That has been appreciated, sometimes for over the course of more than a decade.

But there have been a few places that I think the Court might have been more intentional about, if not its support, about its process. In May 2015, a review was called based on the questions of ordination. At the end of that month, the entire court voted in favour of sending a proposal to the General Council to review those questions partly because that review had been called. And to question whether or not they reflected contemporary understandings and whether or not they could be effective in those kinds of processes. As you know, that was defeated by 50% at General Council and at General Council Executive the following April, the second one, the second similar proposal from Hamilton Conference was also defeated, telling me that a church that had 43% of its elected commissioners say they wanted a conversation was turning down the opportunity to have the conversation which I find deeply troubling. However, I appealed, Julian and Akosua appealed on my behalf the ruling because we felt it would be a very divisive ruling and when the sub-executive met upon the defeat of that appeal., they immediately reinstated the review without considering that the entire conference had put into this process at its Annual Conference Meeting in 2015. I think that that showed a lack of respect

to the court for its concern and as it had expressed it and neglected to register concern with the General Council Executive, well the General Council for having defeated Toronto's motion, but also to the General Council Executive for having defeated Hamilton's motion. Deep concerns had been raised and they had been raised by the full court and I think the sub-Executive, in moving this review forward, failed to see that and failed to reflect it.

Julian Falconer

If I may, and following up on what Gretta has just said, I would think the ultimate sign of support would be to get this off this hearing track and support the dialogue that these folks all want to have. That would be the support that's called for, for both the minister, the congregation, and the church.

*John A. T. Robinson actually called for the word to be unused for a generation.