

**Commitment to Community,
With or Without God:**

Promoting Respectful Dialogue
As We Look to the Future
of The United Church of Canada



with **Gretta Vosper**
and members of
West Hill United Church
Wednesday, September 27, 2017
Forest Hill United Church
45 Kimble Court
Fredericton, New Brunswick

The United Church of Canada is in a time of radical transition. Membership is in steep decline and its future is uncertain.

The congregation of West Hill United Church and their minister, Gretta Vosper, with a vision of what the church might become for another generation, have radically redefined what it means to them to be a United Church Community. They have done so, even as Vosper's life-time involvement with this denomination has taken her to a place where she now self-identifies as an atheist.

That has led many to conclude that she has disqualified herself from ministry. Her congregation continues to affirm her ministry.

We have invited them to tell their story and share their experience.

This is another of those challenging moments in the life of our denomination. We face it at a time when civil discourse is hard to come by; when the tactics of the politics of polarization have affected us all.

In this environment it is easier to find echo chambers for our own opinions than it is to engage those with whom we disagree. The need to find common ground and common cause has never been greater.

When people will not speak with one another, there is slim hope for finding that common ground. So we invite you, whether traditionalist or atheist or somewhere in between, to join us with your questions and concerns.

The aim of this time together is to hear and to understand one another. In an atmosphere of trust we hope to consider whether and how the United Church might provide space for all of us.

Agenda

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| 9:30 am to 10:00 | Arrival and Registration at Forest Hill United Church |
| Coffee, Tea, & Muffins to Welcome you | |
| 10:00 - 10:20 | Welcome and Introductions. Plans and process for the day. |
| 10:20 - 10:40 | Morning presentation by Gretta: My journey within the United Church and the West Hill congregation. Development of my beliefs and why I identify as an atheist. |
| 10:40 - 11:20 | Small Groups: Facilitated reaction, discussion and choice of questions. |
| 11:20 – 12:00 | Plenary Time - Gretta's response to some of the questions from small groups. |
| Noon Hour | Lunch will be provided. |
| 1:00- 1:30 | Plenary Time - more response to the rest of our questions . |
| 1:30- 1:50 | Afternoon Presentation by Gretta, Debbie and Babette of West Hill United: The West Hill community, our place in The United Church of Canada - barriers and the disciplinary process. |
| 1:50- 2:35 | Small Groups: Facilitated reaction, discussion and choice of questions. |
| 2:35- 2:50 | Refreshment Break |
| 2:50- 3:40ish | Plenary Time - Gretta, Debbie and Babette respond to questions from small groups. |
| 3:40ish- 4:00 | Open question and answer time. An opportunity for individuals in plenary to raise additional questions. |
| 4:00 pm | Adjournment and Refreshments |
| You are on your own for supper. We reconvene in the Dineen Auditorium in Head Hall on the UNB campus at 7:00 pm for the evening session. (Over) | |

| Evening Session on the UNB Campus. Dineen Auditorium, Head Hall | |
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| \$10.00 admission at the door | |
| 6:30 pm | Doors open |
| 7:00- 8:10 | Theist -Atheist Dialogue: Gretta Vosper in conversation with Dr. John Valk. |
| 8:10- 8:50 | A moderated Question and Answer time. |
| 8:50 - 9:00 | Thank-yous and Closing |

Gretta Vosper is minister at West Hill United Church in Toronto and the the author of *“With or Without God: Why The Way We Live is More Important Than What We Believe”* (Harper Collins, 2008) and *“Amen: What Prayer Can Mean in a World Beyond Belief”* (Harper Collins, 2012.) Both books are available at Westminster Books on King Street in Fredericton and at Chapters in the Regent Street Mall. Gretta’s website and blog is at <http://www.grettavosper.ca>

John Valk, PhD, formerly chaplain on campus, is now Professor of Worldview Studies at Renaissance College, UNB. He has presented papers on worldviews at national and international conferences and published in various academic journals and books. He has co-written *“An Islamic Worldview in Turkey”* with members of the Faculties of Religious Education and Theology at Ankara University in Turkey and is currently writing a book on *“Worldviews as Inward Journey and Outward Expression”*. He is also a Visiting Professor at the Protestant University in Darmstadt, Germany.

Other Guests:

Debbie Ellis and **Babette Oliveira**, members of the West Hill United Church congregation.

The Rev Chris Levan, minister at College Street United Church in Toronto

WHAT DO YOU THINK?

Toronto Conference of the United Church, acting on a complaint from an individual with no connection to the West Hill Congregation, has recommended that Gretta be placed on the discontinued service list – that is, barred from ministry in the United Church – in spite of her desire to continue her ministry and in spite of West Hill’s desire that she continue to serve them. This is an absolutely unprecedented action and, should the General Council follow through, it will establish a new precedent.

The General Council of our Church has convened a Judicial Committee to rule on Toronto Conference’s recommendation. That process does not include opportunity for members of the church at large to express their views.

We nevertheless would like to ‘take a reading’ of your feelings about whether or not The United Church can be a place where both clergy and congregants can pursue their spiritual journey even if that does not lead to affirming belief in God as a supernatural being who intervenes in the world.

The Rev Chris Levan, formerly of Wilmot United here in Fredericton, and now minister at College Street United in Toronto, in the same presbytery as Gretta, will also be here to register your feelings, reactions and opinions. Please take the opportunity to speak to Chris or a member of the Planning Committee while you are here.

Registration

To register, contact Owen Washburn at:

owenw@nbnet.nb.ca

or at 1 (506) 472-3842

Please include your name, street address, email address and telephone number.

The registration fee will be yours to determine - a free-will offering - either in advance of our time together or upon your arrival. While we have not asked for a fixed registration it is not because we do not have expenses. Our costs include honoraria, travel, technical support, the venues we are using, and your lunch and refreshment breaks.

Based on anticipated numbers of participants, we estimate that an average donation of \$30 for the day-time sessions plus the suggested \$10.00 admission fee at the door for the evening session will cover our costs. (A cheque or cash only please. We are unable to accept credit cards.) Since your participation in the event is more important than what you are able to pay, please contribute as you are best able to. No one will be turned away.

Invite the committed and the curious
to come with you!

Members of the Planning Committee for this event are: Rev Ali Anningson, Rev Brett Anningson, Rev Mac Campbell, Rev Murray McFarlane, Dr Julia Hughes, Mr Norman Laverty, Rev Ann Morwood. Mr Owen Washburn, Ms Gail Wylie.