A preacher who doesn’t believe in God

Rev. Vosper’s views have stirred an existential passion among congregants

CATHERINE PORTER
TORONTO
Rev. Vosper does not believe in God. However, despite being an outspoken atheist, she has steadfastly maintained her place in the United Church of Canada, which has two million followers across the country and is Canada’s pre-eminent Protestant church.

“This is my church,” said Rev. Vosper, 60. “The United Church made me who I am.”

In a country where thinning congregations have led to many church sanctuaries being converted into condominiums, Rev. Vosper’s outspoken views have stirred an existential passion.

Progressive church
She has also driven a deep rift into a progressive church considered as Canadian as maple syrup. In 2015, a public letter she wrote sparked so much ire and the local jurisdiction of the church launched a review committee to examine her beliefs.

After a much-publicised hearing, which she called a “heresy trial”, the local panel ruled her “unsuitable” for Ministry since she “does not believe in God, Jesus Christ or the Holy Spirit.”

She was on the verge of being defrocked. But, just as the national church’s final review of her case began in November, the local jurisdiction settled with Rev. Vosper and agreed she could continue to minister her congregation in Toronto. “This doesn’t alter in any way the belief of The United Church of Canada in God,” the church announced, to the confusion of many. Since the terms of the settlement are confidential, congregants were left to divine for themselves what these two seemingly contradictory positions meant.

Rev. Vosper enrolled in divinity school after her marriage broke down. By then, the United Church of Canada was propelled more by social justice than theology, according to Kevin Flatt, author of After Evangelicalism: The 60s and the United Church. The first church to ordain transgender ministers, its leadership supported abortion and same-sex union before either became legal in Canada.

Deconstructing God
Divinity school cemented her metaphorical views of God, Rev. Vosper says. But once she began preaching, she realised many congregants thought she was talking about an all-knowing, all-seeing spirit. So, four years after she was hired at West Hill United Church in 1997, she delivered a sermon called “Deconstructing God,” laying bare her disbelief in a theistic God.

She recalls congregation members hugging her afterward. “Most of the congregation was in a similar place theologically,” said Debbie Ellis, a member at West Hill for more than two decades.

Since then, Rev. Vosper has slowly stripped away the traditional biblical language from her Sunday “weekly gatherings”. In its place, she put words and rituals that reflected her congregation’s agreed beliefs – love, justice, compassion, integrity and forgiveness. NY TIMES