

National Affairs by Claire Hoy ? Just show her the door

First, a confession, which seems an appropriate word under the circumstances.

I was raised in a small eastern Ontario town from strictly Presbyterian roots and the truth of the matter is we didn't have a lot of good things to say about the United Church or, as I have always called it, the United Social Club of Canada.

That's because my grandmother, a devout Presbyterian who voted against leaving her faith to join the United Church in 1925, always believed that the new organization was less theological and more political. It's hard to argue with that.

All of which, as you may have guessed, brings me once again to the controversy over United Church minister Gretta Vesper, a self-described atheist who has been preaching love and kisses from her pulpit in Scarborough to a small but dedicated group of parishioners.

As you likely know, the Church itself has ? finally, after years of playing Ostrich by sticking its collective head in the sands ? recommended that she be placed on the ?Discontinued Service List,? i.e. that she be fired for the rather obvious reason that she isn't buying what the Church is selling, although she is accepting their money for her efforts.

Vesper has actually made a small personal industry out of her non-belief, writing books and appearing hither and yon in public to espouse her view that God is bunk.

The United Church, which has been widely known as ?the NDP at prayer,? once claimed to be Canada's largest denomination, but, like many mainline churches (but not Roman Catholics, Evangelicals, Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists and Sikhs) it has been desperately sinking in both membership and weekly attendance for many years.

In 1964, for example, it had more than one million members (second among Protestants only to the Anglicans) but by 2012 that had shrunk to 463,879, with average weekly attendance a paltry 158,510. By 2014, weekly attendance had shrunk even more to 139,000. Compare that performance to a 53 per cent increase in Canadian Catholics between 1961 and 2001 and an overall three percent hike among Protestants (thanks mainly to Evangelicals) and you'll get the idea that the Church is in dire straits.

It's not necessarily because overall belief in God has declined dramatically ? whatever Vesper may claim. Indeed, a 2015 Angus Reid poll found 73 per cent of Canadian respondents said they do believe in God or a higher power ? I wasn't asked, but I'm right there. Now even that is a drop from 81 per cent 15 years ago, but it's still pretty impressive.

Defenders of Vesper try to characterize her situation as a free speech affair. No, it's not. Certainly she has the freedom in Canada to be an atheist. That's not the issue. But surely she is not entitled to represent a Church which holds a certain set of beliefs ? chief among them the Divinity of Christ ? while at the same time publicly rebuking the very essence of their religion. If she and her followers wish to promote their own world view then surely they are free to get their own building and do just that.

In a CBC interview earlier this year, Vesper claimed that ?at least upwards of 50 per cent of the clergy in the United Church . . . don't believe in a theistic, supernatural, God,? apparently an attempt to place her own extreme views in the mainstream.

That rather absurd claim prompted Vancouver United Church minister Rev. Richard Bott to conduct an online survey among his fellow ministers across the country, where he found that almost 95 per cent of respondents said that yes, indeed , they do believe in God.

One wonders what the other five percent, along with Vesper, are still doing there. In political terms, it's tantamount to being sworn in as a Liberal cabinet minister only to announce that from now on you're voting NDP. How long do you think the Liberals would obfuscate before cancelling your membership?

And yet, that's exactly what the United Church has done for decades.

Finally, it seems, they're ready to do the right thing, but even here they're making it as drawn-out and painful as possible.

Just show her the door and tell her to take her Godless flock with her.

