

## Gretta Vosper

### “Beyond God: Becoming What We Believe In”

Episode 28 of The Advent of Evolutionary Christianity

EvolutionaryChristianity.com

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**Gretta Vosper** is the author of *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live Is More Important than What We Believe*. The book is informed and inspired by her pastoral ministry at West Hill United Church (Toronto, Canada). Founder of the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity, she was listed as one of “the most compelling women in Canada” by *More Magazine* in 2009.

#### HIGHLIGHTS

This episode is an inside look at **the challenges and opportunities for a religious congregation refashioning its shared commitment**—moving away from any statement of **shared belief** to a commitment to strive toward **shared values** in how members interact as a community. This episode thus joins that of Ian Lawton’s (episode 11) in reporting on **actual experience in how clergy and churchgoers** can continue to grow in their faith journey and stay together as a community **while leaving behind supernatural beliefs and dogmas**. Topics explored include why **church community** will continue to be important, how and when **“God” language** continues to be used, and **why even atheists would want to attend**. Also discussed at length are **nonsupernatural forms of prayer** and how an evolutionary perspective opens the way for relating to **death as natural and sacred**.

#### SUGGESTED AUDIENCES

Any secular or theologically moderate-to-liberal classroom or congregation in which “religious” is not equated with allegiance to supernatural beliefs and doctrines will find much to consider and discuss in this episode. Because most of the conversation centers on the challenges and opportunities of moving congregational life and worship experience in new directions, this episode will be very attractive to theologically progressive clergy groups and seminarians. Church congregations exploring paths for loosening the reins of creeds and belief-based doctrines will also find this episode enormously helpful.

## BLOG COMMENTS

### Richard R. Powell says:

I enjoyed this talk immensely. Fun to imagine what it would be like to grow up with a Sunday School experience in which you were taught a way of viewing your important texts as literature and story, rather than holy writ.

## KEYWORD TOPICS

**Children's religious education, God** (as love v. as a supernatural, interventionist being), **Jesus** (as model for ethical behavior v. as only Son of God), **core values, core beliefs, contemporary theological scholarship, lectionary and liturgy** (role of in reinforcing ancient and literalistic understandings of scripture), **Daniel Dennett, New Atheism, integrity** (in preaching), **beliefs** (contemporary v. traditional), **John Spong, John Dominic Crossan, Marcus Borg, Bible** (as not the authoritative Word of God for all time), **statement of faith** (drawbacks of), **shared values** (as more important than shared beliefs), **diversity of belief** (difficulties in forging a community within), **non-exclusive v. inclusive community, God** (concepts of from theistic to nontheistic), **Unitarian Universalism, compassion, atheism** (as compatible with non-exclusive congregation), **love** (as core value), **church** (future role in society), **right relationship** (at all levels, incl planet), **Martin Buber, environmental ethic** (as forged from sense of sacred), **social justice, medical technologies** (problems caused by life extension), **death** (as natural and sacred, not enemy), **Iroquois** (story of death origin), **intergenerational inequity, afterlife** (doubt in), **Christian naturalism, gratitude** (for the gift of life), **prayer** (evolving forms of), **new liturgical music and hymns, evolutionary revival service, nonbelievers** (openly welcomed into church)

## BIOGRAPHY

**Gretta Vosper** was listed as one of “the most compelling women in Canada” by *More Magazine* in 2009. She has been in the spotlight since founding the Canadian Centre for Progressive Christianity in 2004. Her national bestselling book, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live is More Important than What We Believe*, urges clergy to share with their congregations a crucial implication of theological scholarship: that the Bible is not the authoritative word of God for all time. She calls the church to create communities grounded in values that promote the wellbeing of all life on the planet, rather than in indefensible doctrinal beliefs. Vosper's second book, on the subject of prayer, is due to be published Easter 2012.

Bishop John Shelby Spong introduced Gretta Vosper to his readership as a guest columnist, calling her “one of the most exciting voices in 21<sup>st</sup> century Christianity.” Her work has been featured in media across Canada and internationally; she was the keynote speaker

for Common Dreams, The International Conference for Religious Progressives in Melbourne, Australia in 2010. As a regular on the “Culture Wars” segment of the John Oakley Show on AM640, Toronto’s most popular Talk Radio morning program, Vosper brings a perspective that is welcomed by a broad spectrum of religious and nonreligious folk alike.

In her words, “having twice narrowly avoided heresy trials,” she continues to lead West Hill United Church – “a progressive community of faith, growing out of the Christian tradition” – in Toronto, Ontario. Non-exclusive inspirational liturgical and music resources written by Vosper and her partner, Scott Kearns, are used internationally.

Gretta Vosper’s website is <http://grettavosper.ca>

## SUPPLEMENTARY VIDEOS

Five-minute collage of Vosper speaking at Progressive Christianity conference in Australia in 2010 : <http://www.c3exchange.org/learn/sermons/>

Vosper addresses Center for Inquiry about her book, *With or Without God*. Her talk begins at 5:30 mins. 100 minutes total. <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gt3o3fDg2N4>

## SUPPLEMENTARY WEBPAGE

Listener comments to this audio can be found (and new ones posted) at:

<http://evolutionarychristianity.com/blog/general/gretta-vosper-what-matters-is-how-we-live-not-what-we-believe/>

## QUESTIONS FOR REFLECTION AND DISCUSSION

1. **“With or Without God.”** The title of this episode is “Beyond God: Becoming What We Believe In” and the title of Gretta Vosper’s book is, *With or Without God: Why the Way We Live Is More Important than What We Believe*.

**Question 1:** *What was your response to the title of this episode and to learning the title of Vosper’s book in the introduction to this dialogue? And did your response change as you listened to the audio or read the transcript?*

2. **Liberal religious education for children.** Gretta Vosper recalls with affection and gratitude the **curriculum used by the United Church of Canada** when she was a child in Sunday School. She explains,

It taught about **Jesus** as being a model for our behavior, for living in right relationship, for being good. It taught about **God** as love. Those were concepts that were still not very welcome in many

mainline denominations. But that's the milieu in which I grew up, so I have an understanding of God that was very broad—even as a young child.

**Question 2A:** *What, if anything, were you taught in your religious education: about **God**? about **Jesus**? And was yours a happy experience?*

**Question 2B:** *What do you recall as being **your most deeply felt understandings of your religion** (or its equivalent) when you were a child? And if your understandings as an adult are now quite different, does that shift occur to you as a loss or a gain?*

**3. Theologically liberal sermons are trumped by traditional worship.** Gretta Vosper tells the story of how she suddenly realized that her theologically liberal preaching was being undermined by **the other elements of the worship service that remained unchanged**. She recalls,

I was in leadership in the Church for just about ten years when I had the opportunity to be in conversation with many congregations. The conversation focused on their core values and core beliefs. It took about a two-year period to go through about twenty congregations with this project. At the end of it, when I looked at it, **I was astounded** that even the people that I was ministering to, and those that my colleagues who had been trained in the same kind of colleges were leading—that many of the people in those congregations, unless they had some of their own theological education, they had not grasped that contemporary scholarship even existed. **They still believed in a very supernatural, interventionist understanding of God** as a being. **They still believed that Jesus was the only Son of God; that he had died for their sins**, although they couldn't really articulate what that meant.

The next Sunday, our service began as usual with a Call to Worship and a Prayer of Approach, and we sang **hymns** that spoke about Jesus being the light of the world and God reigning over all Creation. **It was so obvious, suddenly, why people weren't getting it.** I was spending twenty to twenty-five minutes every Sunday reading a Lectionary passage, explaining the context out of which it had grown, who had written it, why they had written it, what the socio-economic situation was, the political situation, the players, and why none of that had any connection with what was going on in our world right now—or if it did, picking up from that point and jumping off into something else. Then, usually in the last two or three minutes, pulling in some metaphor that I could use to make sense of it. But I had really missed what was going on, entirely. So that was when I realized I couldn't lead that way anymore. I couldn't be in leadership in the Church if what I was doing was **merely deconstructing scripture and reconstructing it in a way that really wasn't making it any more meaningful for people.**

**Question 3:** *What is (or was) **your experience as a churchgoer or clergy**: How important is it for the entire worship service to be on the same theological wavelength, so to speak? What has the stronger pull on you: traditional hymns and liturgy or the content of sermons?*

**4. Statements of faith as barriers to congregational movement.** Gretta Vosper talks about the confusion and fear that arises when there is talk of altering a congregation's statement of

faith that specifies the theological beliefs expected of church members. She tells the story of her own congregation, in which the leaders

... knew **the Bible was not the authoritative Word of God for all time**, and they were ready to explore the implications of that—because once you say that, there’s an awful lot we do that rests on that belief. Take that belief away, and what do we have and what are we working with?

... We sat down at the table and thought that we would start that process, but as soon as we did, one of the first things that someone wanted to put in was, “We don’t believe the Bible is the authoritative Word of God for all time.” Well, as soon as we wrote that down, we realized that there would be people in our community who might think that it was. And then came the question, “Who do we think **Jesus** is?” And immediately after writing something down, we thought, “Oh, there are people in our community who might think that.” So, we realized that we were doing what every **statement of faith** down through the history of humanity has ever done—and that’s draw a line in the sand. And we didn’t want to do that.

At this point the church leaders realized that they could not simply *change* the Statement of Faith. They needed to retire it, thus **shifting away from shared beliefs and toward shared values**. Gretta Vosper explains,

We recognized that what we wanted to do was be like some of those very **early Christian communities** that were called Christian in a very derogatory way, because they lived differently than the people around them, because they placed values that they held in high esteem at the center of their communities and they tried to live up to them, no matter the cost. We recognized that what we wanted to do was to be able to be identified as **people who lived according to some values that were really hard to live up to, but that we were going to struggle with**. And so, we wrote instead another document that we called *VisionWorks*. That document has been what has really formed this work—given it form—in these intervening years.

**Question 4A:** *If you are part of a religious community or congregation, **what role does a creedal doctrine or statement of faith play** in identifying what unites the members and attracts new ones?*

**Question 4B:** *To what extent **do you personally agree** with whatever your group’s articulated shared statement of belief or mission or covenant may be? And does it bother you if the statement seems to be **out of sync** with your own faith stance, and perhaps with that of many other participants?*

**Question 4C:** *If your congregation or denomination made a move to shift from shared beliefs to shared values, **would you be open to that**? Overall, how important is it for theologically liberal congregations **to forthrightly specify** what, at the core, binds the individuals into a community?*

5. **Statements of core values replace statements of faith.** The preamble to the 2009 Visionworks document, as it appears on the church website, reads:

As individuals from a wide variety of backgrounds and with a diversity of viewpoints, we come together in community, **holding in common a reverence for life that moves us to pursue justice, seek truth, live fully, care deeply, and make a difference in the world. While united by life-enhancing values, we are enriched and challenged by our differences in perspectives and beliefs.**

As we strive to develop meaningful community, we draw from **our origins in an historic religious tradition**, the knowledge gained about that tradition over time, diverse sources of insight and wisdom, and contemporary ethical and philosophical thought. We distill from these sources the **core values we believe are fundamental to right relations with self, others, all life, and the planet.** In this progressive work, we attempt to demonstrate openness, intellectual rigor, honesty, courage, creativity, sensitivity, and respect.

VisionWorks articulates those common values and understandings that underlie our choices as we set priorities, make decisions, take action, and relate with one another in community. It reflects what we hold to be of utmost significance in our community life, and calls us to **evaluate ourselves in light of these values.**

Full document at: <http://www.westhill.net/visionworks-2009>

**Question 5:** *What is your response to this expression of core values as the guiding document for a church congregation?*

6. **Putting core values to use.** Gretta Vosper talks about how the **core values document** has actually been used in her congregation. She says,

Once we had that first document in place, then whenever someone in the community raised a question about something that we were doing, we would take it to the document, which represented our choices, and we would measure it against what we had said we wanted to be like. If it needed to be changed or removed entirely from the community's celebrations or actions, then it was—and that was where the real change started to happen in the community.

**Question 6:** *What, if anything, does your congregation or group turn to **when resolving differences** among its members or **when discerning that it is time to move beyond the inertia of established practices?***

7. **Inclusive or non-exclusive?** Gretta Vosper characterizes the turn that her congregation made as “nonexclusive” in terms of belief. She distinguishes this from “inclusive” — which is the term that **Ian Lawton** used in episode 11 to describe his congregation's transition, which led to removal of the cross from their church grounds. Gretta explains the distinction:

We chose to create, what we call, a *non-exclusive community*. By that, I mean **a community that will not present any beliefs that might exclude someone else.** That is very different from an *inclusive community* that presents beliefs in an attempt to include all the perspectives that are present in the community.

Later she explains:

**Our common language is values. Our belief systems are very different;** they are culturally what we bring to our value systems. For instance, we have grown up doing things in this particular way, **singing** particular songs, **chanting** this particular thing, **praying** in this particular way. But the values that undergird many of the world's great faith traditions are the values of **love, justice, compassion, and forgiveness**. Raising *those* up in a community and calling a community to live by them completely and immediately **eradicates any barriers based on beliefs**. A conversation about those values can take place across any faith distinction that might be present. So that's how we create this **non-exclusive** community. We speak about those values.

**Question 7:** *Does the distinction between “inclusive” and “non-exclusive” seem important to you? And do you have any experience in how either or both of these approaches fare in actual practice?*

8. **Categories of theistic and nontheistic worldviews and language.** Gretta Vosper characterizes the **diversity of beliefs** in her congregation this way:

It's a very warm, celebratory place to be. Yet, there are people who are very **traditional believers**. There are those who would call themselves **nontheistic believers**: they believe in something they would call God but it's not a being, and it may or may not have any interventionist powers. There are those who are **nonrealists** in terms of God; they don't believe that there is 'a thing out there' — so if they use the word God, they are talking more about our responsibility to love. There are people who would *never* use that word *ever* to describe anything meaningful to themselves. They may refer to themselves as **atheists** or they may prefer not to use any moniker at all, and they may not even call themselves *religious*.

**Question 8:** *Can you see how this range of openly expressed and embraced diversity is perhaps **possible only in a “nonexclusive” community** in which no statement of shared belief is even attempted? In contrast, if an “inclusive” statement of belief were attempted, what could be written that would be acceptable to both traditional believers and atheists ?*

9. **In-group v. out-group distinctions.** Gretta Vosper explains her interest in reducing the in-group v. out-group distinction in this way:

The danger inherent in religion is that it has always drawn lines; it has always **built walls**; it has always identified **a group that is in and a group that is out**. It doesn't matter how multi-faith we can be and how tolerant we become, if we identify exclusively as a community and we have differences from someone else, we are still reinforcing **the wall between us**. It might be a little lower, but it is still a wall. So I'm eager to find ways that we celebrate and hold up the same **common values**.

**Question 9:** *What is your sense of and response to her statement?*

10. **Future church.** Gretta Vosper envisions the future church this way:

The **church of the future** needs to be less and less about the ways that we articulate what is specific to our belief and cultural tradition, and more about articulating in ways that can be **accessible by all**. So that our communities are the places where people come to be reinforced, to be strengthened, to challenge one another, to offer one another solace when we aren't able to live up to the ideals that we hold. If church can be that, then I think it has a very important role to play in a society which is reducing itself to a hundred and forty character sound bites and losing the ability to talk about things that are important in the process of becoming so virtual and virtually focused.

**Question 10:** *In what ways do you agree or disagree with Gretta when envisioning **the future church**?*

11. **Toward an environmental ethic: sacredness, care, vulnerability.** Gretta Vosper speaks of the basis of any environmental ethic in this way. She says,

How do we live in right relationship with those 'others'? It is **Martin Buber's 'I-Thou'** conversation. How do we make everything holy, sacred, of value and of worth in and of itself, so that **we relate to it differently than we do when we are just using it** or when it's simply an object that is there to satisfy our own longings and our own wants?

If we can see the world in that way, we see it very differently and we interact with it very differently. We also place ourselves in the position of deep risk, because we see the world as incredibly beautiful. And anything that maligns or harms that world—the people around us, ourselves—**breaks our hearts**. It's really difficult to live with that kind of an open heart. Community, then, becomes also the place where that woundedness can be held, and we can hold one another when we lament our own shortcomings, the shortcomings of the world as it functions. We can turn our anger against the systemic violence and injustice into life-giving ways of being in the world, life-giving ways of engaging and offering possibility.

**Question 11A:** *Does Gretta speak for you on the topic of an **environmental ethic**? Where do you agree or disagree with her?*

**Question 11B:** *What is more important: for a religious congregation to identify itself by shared beliefs, while respecting large differences in real-world values (such as environmental ethics)? Or is it more important for a congregation to cohere around shared values, while recognizing diversity in belief? **And if values are more important, should a strong environmental value be articulated?** (Notably, that nature has "intrinsic" value well beyond the importance of having it healthy enough to provide services for us.)*

12. **Death as natural and sacred.** Gretta Vosper and Michael Dowd engage in this dialogue about our view of death:

**Gretta:** There is a beautiful prayer in *The Faith Club* from the **Yizkor Jewish Memorial Service** that asks, What if we were given the gift of being able to live forever—but along with that gift comes the fact that there can be no new life: only us forever and always. No first love, no first job, no first discovery. No first anything. Could there ever be any question what our answer would be?



**Michal:** Yes, and it becomes the question, Is it heaven or is it hell? There's an **Iroquois story** that touches on the same point. The tribe was given a choice by Great Spirit, "You can either have immortality or you can have children. Choose." Of course, there was a big debate among the members of the tribe, and finally the grandmothers all sat in circle together and after speaking with each other and being in silence, they came back and said, "We choose children."

It is a choice, and **indigenous cultures** have always known that. When you have to live within the confines of a particular bioregion, a particular watershed, there was always the understanding that population couldn't simply keep growing. Today, we are forced to deal with the same reality as a species, because we are on a planet with seven billion human beings. So this becomes a pertinent issue: *how we think about death*. And do we continue to see **death as "the enemy"** and as something to be overcome? Do we continue to think that if people die, we see it as a failure of medicine?

**Question 12A:** *Have you had any exposure to a **biblical literalist interpretation** of the New Testament that presents **death as "the enemy"** and as punishment for our species' disobedience in the Garden? Do you perhaps still feel that way about death? Or do you think about death in a different way today? Please say more.*

**Question 12B:** *Hearing about two very different portrayals of the role of death—a **Jewish response** and an **Iroquois** mythic tale, what feelings come up for you?*

13. **Societal and psychological costs of "death as enemy."** Continuing on this death theme, the host, Michael Dowd, reports,

My wife, Connie, is passionate on this issue. She calls it '**intergenerational inequity**'—that we're keeping people alive in their eighties and nineties because we have the technology to do so. Yet, in many cases, it is not about the person's quality of life or choice. Moreover, there is now **an enormous expense to society**, and the younger generation is shackled by endless financial debt. The inequity, then, in how money is spent is partly grounded in how we think about death and dying. **Do we see it as a natural process? Do we see death as sacred**, and as no less sacred than life? Do we help each other in our waning years to do what needs to be done: to have the necessary communications so that one can die with peace, gratitude, and trust? That trust is not simply in holding onto some **otherworldly reward** that finally will make this entire life worthwhile, but more that **our life is complete** and we've communicated **gratitude** and been reconciled with people that we have harmed or hurt or betrayed; and that we have had those communications because we have a different way of thinking about death.

Later, Michael Dowd concludes:

Until we grasp that death plays a vital and necessary role in an evolving Cosmos at all levels, I think **Christianity** will continue to be shackled by unnatural, otherworldly notions of the Gospel. **Medical technologies** will continue to prolong physical and emotional suffering and provoke family discord. And I think the **medical industry will continue to underwrite the widening gap** between the rich and the poor. To my mind, few things are more important today than transforming how we view death.

**Question 13A:** Have you **experienced yet in your life the emotional or spiritual cost** of living a society in which the default perspective on death is that it is the enemy?

**Question 13B:** To what extent is the prospect of **'intergenerational inequity'** something that causes you **discomfort** in how death is regarded and managed in your society?

**Question 13C:** To what extent do your beliefs about the existence or nonexistence of an **afterlife** affect how at ease you are with bringing to mind the inevitability of your own death — and the deaths of everyone that you love?

**Question 13D:** At one point, the host (Michael Dowd) lists several [scientific discoveries](#) that have helped him **appreciate the creative role that death plays** in the world around us. He says,

It is the **death of cells** in the embryonic stage of development that keeps us from being spheres. It is the **death of mountains** that allows for healthy soil. It is the **death of stars**, of supernovas and red giants, that allows for the Periodic Table of Elements.

*Did you understand what he was saying, and have you ever thought about **death having a positive role** to play in the world? Overall, is this kind of scientific knowledge helpful for you in overcoming any judgment that may still linger in you about death being something bad and wrong?*

**Question 13E:** Have you **'naturalized' your understanding of death**, such that (at least in the abstract) you accept its existence and perhaps even regard it as **sacred**?

**Question 13F:** Michael Dowd talks about his recent bout with a serious form of **cancer** as having instilled in him **greater gratitude for life**. Have you had such an experience, or do you know of someone for whom a close brush with death similarly increased their zest in living? If so, say more.

14. **The role of churches in fostering conversations about death issues.** Gretta Vosper sums up her position and her experience in fostering real conversations about death in this way:

One of the reasons that we are facing such difficulty is the low numbers of people who are actually having [significant conversations about death]—and those are the kinds of conversations that Church needs to have and allow. Since I have been 'out' about not believing in the kind of **afterlife** that Christianity has always described, I have had deeper, richer conversations about death than ever before with people who are at that portal. I think this is because **people before were afraid to say anything or express doubts**, and now they know that they can talk about it. We can speak of death as **gift** and how we can embrace it differently.

So I think communities have to hold responsibility for those conversations and that will make a different way that we look at the world. You are quite right that our **frantic grasping at the last few years of life** and squeezing time out regardless of the quality of life or regardless of what it is costing future generations is really something that we have to think about, we have to have deep

conversations about. We have to recognize how damaging and detrimental that is to the Earth as a whole and to the people that we purport to love: our children and our grandchildren.

**Question 14A:** *What is **your experience** with engaging in deep and authentic conversations about death? Do such conversations happen easily in church? In your family? With close friends? With yours or a loved one's doctor?*

**Question 14B:** *Might this group want to engage in deep inquiry, learning, and discussion regarding death?*

NOTE: There are many **online resources** for engaging in such learning and discussion. For an expressly “evolutionary” understanding of death and its practical implications (including memorial service resources), visit this page on one of Dowd’s websites:

<http://thegreatstory.org/death-programs.html>. Also visit his blogpost: [“Thank God for Death: Could Anything Be More Sacred, More Necessary, More Real?”](#)

15. **Relinquishing tradition-dependent language in order to accommodate newcomers.**

Gretta Vosper is one of the leaders in Canada for making worship services **more welcoming to newcomers**, including the unchurched. She explains,

Suppose a person walks in the door of my church, and maybe they haven’t gone to church for thirty years and they get up the nerve to make it through the door because something in their life is completely out of whack—either they’ve got a diagnosis, or their relationship is falling apart, or a kid is in trouble, and they think church might help—and they manage to *fall* in my front door. **What point on the learning curve do they have to reach before we start offering them support?** That learning curve needs to be completely flat. So that means **no technical language and no God language that might mean something that we all inside understand but which that person is going to hear as an interventionist, supernatural being that is being prayed to** in order to make their life better. It’s *we as a community* that can help make their life better. And we need to become what we believe in—and then, with that strength and with the recognition of that profound strength and beauty, offer that outward to anybody and everybody.

**Question 15:** *Have you experienced **congregational tension** between whether to structure worship style to appeal primarily to existing membership or whether to make changes toward attracting newcomers? And which way do you yourself tend to lean in your preferences?*

16. **“How do I pray now?”** Gretta Vosper offers that theological change in a congregation can **unsettle traditional notions and styles of prayer**. She explains, “One of the biggest questions I get is, ‘Okay, how do I pray now?’ Or, ‘I don’t know how to pray anymore.’” In fact, her next book (to be published in 2012) is on prayer.

**Question 16:** *What, if any, role does prayer play in your life? How has your practice or your understanding of it shifted for you over the years? What are the benefits? Or do you have a*

*substitute practice that you feel probably serves the functions of prayer? Or, do you feel a missing, and perhaps wish you “believed” enough to pray?*

17. **Community prayer and bearing witness.** Gretta Vosper describes her congregation’s style of community prayer during worship services. She says,

In the community that I serve, of course **we pray regularly**. It doesn’t look like what it was five years ago, or ten years ago. It probably doesn’t look much like what prayer looks like in many other communities of faith. But **the transformational energy** within it is high—and I would say, even higher than what it used to be. So we open our community prayer time by talking about how honored we are to participate in a tradition that is as ancient as it is, that is as diverse as it is. And we **offer into that community our vulnerabilities**. Individuals stand up and say what their vulnerabilities, what their celebrations are. We use a short response. We used to say, “O God, in your mercy, hear our prayer.” Well, that didn’t work for us anymore, so the leader now says, “In this abundant blessing,” and the community responds, “We share the joy.” Or, “In this our time of need ... may love abound.”

So **we still have a prayer response**. It still feels like prayer for people who have been involved in those kinds of communities. But the vulnerability is way higher than it ever was before—mostly because I was the one who was responsible for saying the prayers of the community before. Now, **individuals stand up and offer it**—sometimes with a huge grin on their face because they are so filled with joy at something that has happened in their life; or sometimes with a quavering voice; and sometimes members of the community cannot even understand what is being said because the person is so broken as they offer it into that community. What you see happening is **the community bearing witness** to a truth that lies in the center of someone’s heart, and then being present to offer that person care and support, or to celebrate with them what it is that they have offered. So it is **an enormously transforming and very powerful time** for our community. I would say it is one of the most important things that we do, even though it doesn’t look at all like traditional prayer.

Note: Here is **a sample prayer** from a document, [Holy Breath](#), that is a compendium of prayers Gretta has written for and tested in worship services:

In the living of this day, may I find the courage to let go of my fears, accept the challenges before me and open myself to the **still, small voice** I know to be grounded in holiness. **May my soul be filled with the awe of who I am called to be.** As one who seeks after the light, yet stands within its glowing, I pray, Amen.

**Question 17:** *What comes up for you in your encounter with Gretta Vosper’s perspective on prayer?*

18. **New words for traditional hymns.** Gretta talks about her congregational experience in rewriting the lyrics of traditional hymns, She reports:

We have found at West Hill Church, on this bleeding edge, that one of the things that is best done early on is to **shift the language without shifting the form**. If that can be done, people are far

more willing to make the shift and to go with you... We had moved away from a lot of those traditional songs and had not sung them at all, because we hadn't changed the words. **When we started changing the words and bringing some of that music back, the joy and the tears in our community to have reclaimed something that they thought they had lost was really beautiful.**

**Question 18:** *What is your experience with rewritten hymns? Can it be done in a way that works for you? What about the next generations? Is the disconnect with old hymns carrying new language likely a result, at least in part, of childhood imprinting? If so, should the discomfort of one generation forestall the next generations from imprinting on lyrics more congruent with modern beliefs?*

19. **Reconnecting former Christians with church beyond belief.** Gretta Vosper's final statement in this interview is both a finale and a call to action for Progressive Christian congregations. She says,

There are so many people out there who have not connected into anything, because they don't think that anything is there that they can enjoy, that they can celebrate. So they don't participate; they don't seek it out. This project will give access to a whole different perspective to **people who have been deeply isolated.** When I was speaking in Adelaide, Australia, last year, a gentleman came up to me after I spoke and he said, "You know, I left the Church when I was a very young teenager because I was going through confirmation class, where I was told I had to believe things that I refused to believe—and I have not been back in a church until today." That man was eighty-eight years old.

For that length of time, he had been isolated. But the fact that he came that day meant that, for all that time, he *knew* he was disconnected and he *felt* that isolation. So, **if we can touch people who have been maligned in their journey by the Church,** excluded—if we can touch them and bring them into conversation, honor what they believe, honor what it is that they have to offer *us*, what they have to say and the perspective that they have to share: I think that will be a very important part of our work.

**Question 19:** *Any response to this final statement? Or to the interview as a whole?*

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