Theologian accused: Women report instances of inappropriate conduct

***The Elkhart Truth*—July 13, 1992—Tom Price**

ELKHART – The allegations of sexual misconduct that led a Mennonite panel to suspend theologian John Howard Yoder's ministerial credentials extend beyond the eight women who were willing to testify to a congregational task force.

The eight women's allegations that led to the June 27 church action against Yoder, one of this century's leading theologians, represent "just the tip of the iceberg," according to one of the women who spoke to a task force at Prairie Street Mennonite Church, one of two church panels involved in the investigation.

The women said their group is aware firsthand, by name, of about 30 other women with allegations of sexual misconduct against Yoder, professor of Christian ethics at the University of Notre Dame and a former professor at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries here.

"I know it has international dimensions," said Clara, who has a prominent leadership position in a national Mennonite institution.

Three women contacted by *The Elkhart Truth* requested anonymity for varying reasons, including fear that Yoder would retaliate. They are identified as "Tina," "Clara" and "Colleen." Although their identities are anonymous to readers, they are known to the task force. That group, however, has not told Yoder the identities of the eight women, leaving him uncertain about who has made the allegations.

THE WOMEN SAID the misconduct, which took place primarily from the 1970s through the mid-1980s, included improper hugging, use of sexual innuendo or overt sexual language, sexual harassment, kissing or attempts to kiss women, and forcible sexual behavior. Sexual intercourse was not among the allegations.

Of all the reported allegations, the accusations made by Colleen, a congregational leader, are the most serious.

According to Colleen, Yoder was invited in October 1977 to her home by her husband, "Joe," who asked the theologian to speak at their church's weekend meetings. They had known each other for several years.

Joe was away for most of the weekend leading a retreat and wasn't due back until Sunday afternoon. "I had no reason to mistrust John," said Colleen, who then had two small children. "After I had put the kids to bed, I came down to the living room. John was sitting on the couch. He moved closer to me as we were sitting on the couch. He kept coming closer and closer to me and eventually pushed me over and lay down on top of me. I was very afraid. I began to push him away. He began to shake violently…When I pushed him away and confronted him, he denied there was anything sexual about it."

AFTER A SLEEPLESS night, Colleen invited a single female friend to spend the next night for her protection. "John was visibly upset when he saw her come in," said Colleen, who tried to avoid him the rest of the weekend, at one point hiding in a closet when she saw him coming. "He found me in there and made fun of my fears."

When her husband returned, Colleen told him what happened. The couple wrote Yoder a letter, expressing their outrage. "We wanted some explanation of his behavior," she said. "He never wrote us back."

Although the couple had known Yoder for some time, they were then unaware that some students privately discussed questions about his behavior when they were part of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries community.

"There were a few of us (female students) at the seminary who were at that point experiencing what we called strange behavior," said "Clara," who first met Yoder in the early 1970s. "We talked about it with each other. That was the extent of it. We chalked it

up (as), 'This man is strange. He is awkward. He doesn't know how to relate.' The best thing is to stay away from him."

Clara, who did not have a close student-professor relationship with Yoder, said she initially experienced only "inappropriate hugs" from Yoder when he would close the door when she went into his office. "I would let him know that I was not comfortable with that," she said.

BUT SHE BECAME "very suspicious" about Yoder when in the mid-1970s she learned of his research on singleness. "He sent me a letter one time from Jerusalem when he was there and asked some very, very explicit questions, wanting an explicit response from me about how I, as a single woman, dealt with my sexuality."

In the letter, Yoder told Clara to write him at a private Jerusalem address, which she considered "really strange because I was a good friend of his wife," she said.

Yoder's alleged sexual harassment escalated when he returned to the seminary in the fall of 1976, according to Clara. "At that point, he began to come uninvited to my apartment. I was a single woman at the time," she said. "While his behavior was not inappropriate, coming to my apartment was. I felt like he was infringing on my space. I had a very frank discussion with him and told him I did not want him to come to my apartment, nor did I want him to have any other contact with me.

"I remember literally pushing him away from me at one point, (telling him). 'This is not appropriate. Do not touch me,'" she said. "He quit. He let me go at that point."

Another "inappropriate hug" left a lasting impression with Tina, who first met Yoder at a conference and still remembers their parting conversation. "I reached out my hand to shake his hand. He said, 'Give me a proper goodbye."

"John gave me this huge hug and held me against his body. It was too long and it was too much. (At first) I didn't think anything about it. What a strange old man. He's out of touch

with his body."

Nevertheless, Yoder initiated a correspondence between them in the early 1980s. "I realize now that it was intellectual seduction. For a Mennonite woman who is bright to be taken seriously in the church doesn't happen very often," she said. To have John Howard Yoder acting like my ideas were profound and significant—it was real heady stuff. He probably wrote me five times for every time I wrote him, He was a wonderful resource. He started networking me with women around the world. It was incredible to me that he knew women around the world."

At first, the letters were addressed to Tina and her husband. One day, Tina said Yoder told her not to write him either at his home or office. Instead, he gave her the number of a post-office box, P.O., Box 93, in Osceola—a number, Tina said, Yoder gave to other women as well.

Yoder frequently suggested that Tina meet him at conferences, which she never did. "There were also frequent references to my body," she said. In one letter, Yoder suggested that Tina meet him for her conference, bring her baby along and meet him in his hotel room when he finished his day.

"Then he went into this bizarre, long, detailed description of what it would be like for him to sit in a chair and watch me sit on his bed, take off my clothes and nurse my baby. He described in vivid detail my breasts and other body parts," she said. "When I read the letter, I felt I had been raped. The thought of this dirty old man sitting at his seminary desk fantasizing about my nude body was terrifying to me, and I felt extremely violated and angry. I had never done anything to communicate to him that I was interested in anything but a mentor-protégée relationship."

Tina told her husband about the alleged incident and the letter. Then she wrote Yoder, "told him how angry I was, how inappropriate" his actions were and asked him not to write again. But Yoder continued to write, saying she misunderstood what he meant, according to Tina.

Although Yoder continued to write, Tina responded only once, explaining the inappropriate nature of his actions. Tina has since destroyed Yoder's letters, fearing her children would discover them and misinterpret her involvement in the relationship.

Tina said Yoder asked her frequently to meet him at scholarly conventions, but never at Mennonite Church meetings, telling her he didn't like big Mennonite gatherings.

"I understand now why he doesn't," Tina said. "There must have been dozens of young women who felt they had this special mentor-protégée relationship with John, and if they all gathered in the same place it would be embarrassing for John."