A Known Secret: Church slow to explore rumors against leader

***The Elkhart Truth*—July 14, 1992—Tom Price**

GOSHEN – When scholars gathered in May for a conference on church-discipline processes last month at Goshen College, they perhaps didn't realize what took place beneath the surface of the discourse.

Theologian John Howard Yoder participated in planning the conference and attended many sessions, as did people involved in virtually all aspects of the ongoing church-discipline process involving him.

Many participants will little note nor long remember what was said there. But in retrospect they may never forget the nearly two decades of silence before the June 27 decision by a regional Mennonite Church commission to suspend Yoder's ministerial credentials over allegations of sexual misconduct.

HOW COULD RUMORS about allegations of sexual misconduct against a prominent church leader circulate for so long that they become known in wider Christian circles, but never publicly acknowledged?

"A lot has been learned in the past 10 to 12 years about how the allegations should be dealt with," said Clara, one of eight women who brought allegations against Yoder. "The assumption back then was you keep these things quiet and you assume, and hope, they will go away."

Increased public attention to sexual harassment and authority abuse within the last decade has prompted churches to find ways to address the concerns brought forward by victims, although many still are reluctant to publicly reveal allegations for fear of ruining an individual's reputation.

But concerns about false allegations do not outweigh concerns for public confrontation of allegations of authority abuse, according to James Lapp, general secretary of the Mennonite Church General Board, "The church has been more seriously charged with complicity in a cover-up. That must end," Lapp said in an interview before departing for an overseas mission trip. "The church must be on the side of healing, reconciliation and hope for victims, and not participate in their further victimization through silence."

THE WOMEN SAID church leaders were slow to address the allegations of misconduct against Yoder, not because they wanted to cover it up, but because they feared a confrontation with their most prominent leader. And some of the women, such as Clara, told only close friends about their experience—making it difficult for any investigation. Clara only told someone outside her circle of intimates when approached in the late 1970s by Marlin Miller, then president of Goshen Biblical Seminary.

"The bigger they are, the harder it is to bring them into accountability," said Vaughn Moreno, co-chairman of a task force on domestic violence for two regional Mennonite bodies. "These things aren't dealt with publicly."

In addition, some of the eight Mennonite women sought ordination from the church.

"None of those women were at a point eight years ago where they were willing to sit down publicly with John, fearing that it might affect their chance of being ordained," said Tina, one of the eight women and a member of a national church board. "To confront Mr. Mennonite, a man of John's stature in the church, is terrifying. When you're dealing with a woman lay person in the church and John Howard Yoder, there is no way mediation will work because there is a gross imbalance of power."

ACCORDING TO THE women, Yoder used this to his advantage. "Ten to 15 years ago, the church stood by John's demands that he meet individually and alone with any of his accusers," said Colleen, a congregational leader. The women also became co-conspirators in the silence because they feared the likely public outpouring of anger directed at them, rather than at the source of the alleged misconduct.

“I feel the repercussion and the anger which is sure to come,” said Clara, who is in a prominent position in a national Mennonite institution. Even before the allegations of misconduct became public, she could hear the question: “How can you destroy John Howard Yoder?”

“I think he’s done that to himself,” she said, “We’re speaking up and saying we won’t tolerate it.”

At a concert, “Joe,” a husband of one of the women, dedicated a song to someone close to him who had been violated by a role model—a person that individual never suspected. After the concert, a woman approached him, asking to speak to him privately about the song: “It’s about your wife, isn’t it?” she said. Joe acknowledged that it was.

“WITHIN A FEW minutes she said, “And we’re talking about John, aren’t we?”

“John?” Joe replied.

“John Howard Yoder,” said the woman, who told Joe that she, too, was a victim of Yoder’s alleged sexual misconduct.

“She became one of those many who were victims—many of whom were known to the church community. But these women were not willing to be as open as they needed to be for the church to expose him,” Joe said, describing the situation as “a painful, recurring litany.”

Mennonites, whose Swiss-German ethnic origins tie many together as a family, have responded to allegations of sexual misconduct against their leaders much as a family would, according to Joe.

“You weep in private, but on the outside we kind of deny it,” he said. “It hasn’t been acknowledged. It has been a known secret.”

But more than a decade of silence about Yoder's allegations of misconduct could produce explosive results.

IF OTHER WOMEN come forward, as Tina believes they will, the women's desk at the Mennonite Central Committee in Akron, Pa., will put them into contact with the support group formed by the eight women.

"I think it's going to he a real unsettling time in the church, because all the rules are changing," Tina said. "What this is going to say is, even if you are the leading theologian in the church, there are certain standards of ethical behavior and morality you're expected to meet. If you cross those, you can no longer count on your victims being quiet."