Yoder's actions framed in writings

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ELKHART – An unpublished essay by John Howard Yoder may confirm the contention of three women who say the past president of the Society of Christian Ethics constructed a biblical and ethical framework for his alleged sexual misconduct.

Yoder, a prominent theologian, justified "non-genital affective relationships" between two Christians—even those who are single or married to other spouses, according to three women with whom Yoder violated sexual boundaries, a Mennonite Church panel determined.

"As long as intercourse is not involved, it is not abusive or inappropriate behavior," Tina said, describing what Yoder allegedly told her and other women. "A sexual relationship between believers is OK even if you're married to someone else, as long as you don't have intercourse."

In interviews with *The Elkhart Truth*, three of the women who testified said the allegations 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.

"He has certainly pushed the limits up to that very line," Tina said. "As the church's leading intellectual, he felt his job is to push the limits with these ideas."

Yoder wrote a 1975 memo called, "What is Adultery of the Heart?" In it, he analyzed Jesus' statement from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:28: "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

“What then is the ‘adultery of the heart’ which Jesus condemns? It is failing to see in another woman one’s sister, seeing in her an object instead of a person,” Yoder wrote. “By forbidding ‘adultery of the heart,’ Jesus forbids the morality of fear and taboo, for it is that which degrades women.”

Yoder described the concept of “familial protection,” which comes into play when a man perceives a woman to belong to his tribe or family, such as a sister, mother or daughter. Because men consider these women under their protection, those women cease to be sexual objects for the men and become persons, he wrote.

Yoder sought to extend that concept to the church, whose members traditionally have been described as “sisters and brothers.”

“‘Familial protection’ can extend as far as the faith,” he wrote. “Instead of the vicious circle in which taboos and anxiety dramatize and provoke erotic excitement, those relations can be de-dramatized, calmed by familiarity.”

According to Yoder, this familiarity between brothers and sisters often has no need for physical expression. “But in cases of deeper sharing, especially if some particular trauma has been caused by taboos about the body, some corporal (bodily) expression—*abrazo* (an embrace), touching—can celebrate and reinforce familial security, far from provoking guilt-producing erotic reactions.”

That phrase can have an entirely innocent interpretation. For instance, a woman who becomes distraught after describing childhood sexual abuse receives an affirming hug or a gentle touch on the hand from a man.

But like a half-finished jigsaw puzzle, the addition of other pieces can change the picture.

Colleen described in greater detail the conversation that took place between her and Yoder on that October 1977 after he allegedly forced himself on top of her.

“When I pushed him away and confronted him, he denied there was anything sexual about it,” she said.

According to Colleen, Yoder specified in graphic language that he did not intend to have intercourse with her, because that would be incest with their relationship as “brothers and sisters” in the church.

“After Colleen’s, experience, I reread some of the stuff and was quite shocked at what I found here,” said Joe, her husband and a former student of Yoder’s at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. “I really think that John was assuming that he had the right to experience or demand or pursue acts of intimacy with other women that went far beyond the accepted boundaries. He clearly allowed himself that behavior because he had convinced himself this was a kind of intimacy that was permitted within the family of faith. That’s what he tried to convince Colleen.”

Joe said he tried to confront Yoder about his alleged behavior. “He has not been willing to acknowledge that he has violated our marriage covenant. He has invaded a covenanted relationship that was made within the Christian community to which he is committed,” Joe said. “Anyone who is willing to be honest with himself knows what he is doing when he does this stuff.”

According to Tina, Yoder’s remarks sound familiar. “One of the lines he’s used on a number of women I’ve met is, ‘We are on the cutting edge. We are developing some new models for the church. We are part of this grand, noble experiment. The Christian church will be indebted to us for years to come,’” she said. “He maintains that it’s even appropriate for two people, who may be married to other people, to be in bed nude together, as long as they don’t have intercourse.”

Yoder had several unpublished papers, which dealt with various themes related to sexuality. In addition, scholars routinely circulate drafts to test exploratory ideas against their colleagues’ critiques.

“He would send us a manuscript on ‘Singleness’ and ask us to respond and send it back to him,” said Clara, a student in the 1970s, “Frankly, I thought they were garbage. It wasn’t my understanding of singleness at all.”

Some of Yoder’s unpublished papers remain in the library at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. Tina said the papers remain there for a reason.

“Nobody would publish them. He was so angry because he thought he was really on to something wonderful,” she said. “In a bizarre way, he’s a very ethical man. He’s got to have an ethical system that supports his behavior. I think he was trying to build an ethical system to justify his behavior, and it just doesn’t float. There were holes all over the place.”