News

John Howard Yoder disciplined for sexual misconduct

Elkhart, Ind.—The Church Life Commission of the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference on June 27 suspended the ministerial credentials of John Howard Yoder over allegations of sexual misconduct (see news clip on page 308 of our July 14 issue). The action calls for restitution and a program of therapy, after which restoration of credentials will be considered.

Yoder, professor of Christian ethics at the University of Notre Dame and a former professor at Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries in Elkhart, cooperated with an 11-month investigation by two Mennonite Church panels into allegations presented in testimony by eight women.

The action was based on the work of a task force of people from the Mennonite Church, appointed by the elders of Prairie Street Mennonite Church in Elkhart, where Yoder is a member. "The charges brought by the women are accurate, and John has violated sexual boundaries," the task force reported. "John has acknowledged the truth of the charges and has expressed deep regret for the hurt his actions have caused for the women."

Although the panels did not elaborate about the nature of the allegations, three of the eight women told *The Elkhart Truth* that most of the incidents took place in the 1970s through the mid-1980s, when Yoder was president and a professor of theology at Goshen Biblical Seminary in Elkhart.

The women, who are in positions of church leadership, 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.

"It can range from suggesting, 'Sit on my lap' to actually pulling people down on his lap, inappropriate kissing and hugging," one of the women said. "It certainly violated the professor-student relationship. It certainly violates the marriage covenant and our understanding of that within the church."

Yoder had told the two panels that the alleged misconduct is not taking place currently, sources said.

"They speak for me—not with perfect accuracy, but accurately enough that I don't want to debate what they say," Yoder said on June 29. He declined further comment. "It's in the hands of two church agencies, one at the district level and one based in the congregation," he said. "My acceptance of that structure makes it very hard to see on what grounds I ought to be going around them in public."

Rationalization: After five meetings with the task force, Yoder agreed to meet with an accountability group and to undergo therapy "to work thoroughly with ... a high degree of rationalization and a denial of the problems associated with his sexual misconduct," according to the task force's statement.

"John has recognized the deep rifts to integrity and trust that have developed between himself and the church and its institutions," the task force said. "Furthermore, John has agreed to yield to the will of the church regarding standards of conduct between men and women. He has committed himself to begin no new sexually intimate relationships and has already acted to cut off ongoing relationships that violate church standards."

The task force said that Yoder will prepare a statement for the eight women who brought the allegations. "He is also preparing a statement to the church community as an initial step in his desire to follow a path that acknowledges wrongs committed," it said.

This marks the third investigation into the allegations of Yoder's misconduct since rumors first came to the attention of a Mennonite Church official in the 1970s, leading some to call for Yoder's resignation from the seminary. According to a source close to the investigation, Goshen Biblical Seminary examined similar allegations but dropped the matter in 1984, when

Howard Zehr (MCC)

Antoinette Jolly and Karl Magee (above) became friends with Mennonite Central Committee workers through their connection with Hope House, a community organization in New Orleans. Antoinette says, "I want my children to do something I didn't do: to finish school, try to go to college and get a nice job. I want them ... to be independent and work and take care of themselves."

Hansulrich Gerber, Mennonite Central Committee secretary for Europe programs, attended the First European Conference on Peacemaking and Conflict Resolution in April. About 120 people from European countries and the United States met in Antalya, Turkey. The site was significant, says Gerber. "Turkey is something of a hinge between Western and Islamic societies. It is under pressure from both occidental and oriental interests. Conflicts and crisis often take place at the hinges," he says. Gerber views the convening of people from universities, government, private and church agencies as a "much needed sign of hope" because it demonstrates a commitment to dialogue and cooperation as a means of conflict resolution.

As of July 1, Mennonite World Conference has moved its North American office to 50 Kent Ave., Kitchener, ON N2G 3R1. Kathy Good continues as MWC administrative associate for North America.

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Borderlinks and Witness for Peace are organizing a travel seminar through Guatemala and Mexico Oct. 3-25. Participants will travel to Guatemala City and repopulated villages in the countryside, visit refugee camps in southern Mexico and meet with government officials and human rights workers in Mexico City. For information call (602) 628-8263.

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When Mark Rockson left Bethel College, North Newton, Kan., he was heir-apparent of a Fanti chiefdom in Ghana. When he arrived in the African nation he learned that he was eligible to become king of Nzema, a Ghannian province. When he returned to Bethel in April he was neither king or chief. Rockson learned of his father's death in February. As eldest son, he was next in line for his father's post as chief of his tribe. The chief is essentially mayor of a town, Rockson said. A recent graduate in international development at Bethel, Rockson hopes to someday do development work with the people of his country. Tribe elders arranged for a first cousin of Rockson to take over the chief's responsibilities. His sister agreed to become queen mother of the Nzema tribes. Tribal leaders are less likely to kill a queen than they are a king, Rockson said. As part of his agreement with Nzema leaders, Rockson said he would serve as ambassador for the nation of Nzema. He will try to talk to business leaders and others who may be interested in setting up businesses in Ghana. Rockson says he hopes to continue his study at Bethel to earn a degree in business, followed by graduate study. Eventually he wants to return to Ghana.

Yoder ended his seminary employment.

"The reasons that led to John's termination here were the result of an extended process over longer-standing issues," said Marlin Miller, who since 1975 had been president of Goshen Biblical Seminary. "This was considered the best way to deal with those issues." On the advice of legal counsel, Miller, now AMBS president, declined further comment.

A second investigation, initiated by Prairie Street Church elders in 1985-86, never got off the ground because no women would come forward for a face-to-face confrontation with Yoder, sources said. *Tom Price in* The Elkhart Truth

Reconciliation: *Pearl Janzen (left), Reedley, Calif., and Nadenia Myron, Phoenix, Ariz., call attention to "500 years since Columbus."*

Pacific District breaks down walls

Warden and Ritzville, Wash.—Some thought the Pacific District Conference planners short-circuited things by jumping right into "reconciliation," this year's chosen subject, without a theological opener. Others, accepting the premise that believing is living, only needed the bedrock Scriptures (like Ephesians 2:14) right along with the agenda.

At any rate the 77 delegates (150 registrants) representing 34 western U.S. congregations broke down walls on at least three fronts, including the wall of distance. The district reaches from Canada to Mexico.

Marcia and Merle Holsopple, pastors at Warden Mennonite Church, set the pace with opening worship, a mimed skit of labeled boxes piled high. (Labels included liberal/conservative, rich/poor, male/female, rural/urban, white/people of color, Mennonite Church/General Conference Mennonite Church.) Two children knocked down the wall with small wooden crosses and embraced.

Steve Ratzlaff (who was thrust into the role of moderator when Clayton Auernheimer died last year) opened with "Patriarchy, Battering and Exploitation," not, as he said, your traditional conference sermon.

"Christianity," he said, "has silently been part of white male privilege," adding that "most rapes are not done by pathological freaks but by loved ones." He testified that "some of the best moments of life come when you're not in control." Isn't that what happens "when you become one with Christ—you give up control and love others as equals?"

Fleshing out the conference theme, "Restoration: Breaking Down the Walls," guest speaker Howard Zehr, Akron, Pa., gave four talks on the Victim Offender Reconcilation Program (VORP). He quoted one judge as saying the words make a horrible-sounding acronym but are "music to my ears."

Zehr's topics were "A Time to Lament" (which opens the door to forgiveness), "Filling the Void" (locking people up doesn't reduce crime), "Can Justice Respect?" (Christ saves us on the basis of what we need, not what we deserve) and "God of Wrath, God of Restoration" (the Bible moves from unlimited retaliation to limited retaliation to unlimited forgiveness).

During the past year the district's peace and justice committee provided dollars and energy for each congregation to get involved some way in VORP. It also gave each congregation a copy of Zehr's book on the subject, *Changing Lenses: A New Focus on Justice and Crime.*

Full-time staff: Denominational walls next got the attention. A whole morning was devoted to conversation about the Pacific District Conference integrating with the (Mennonite Church) Pacific Coast Conference and Southwest Conference, forming two conferences, dividing it at California's northern border. Joshua So of San Francisco wished for one organization. "Have a full-time staff," he said. "Set