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LOCAL

Event for victims of John Howard Yoder

Mennonite John Howard Yoder was accused of sexually exploiting women

Margaret Fosmoe South Bend Tribune

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Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart will host an event March 22 to acknowledge institutional responsibility for sexual exploitation against women by the late John Howard Yoder, who was a prominent Mennonite theologian, and to help bring peace and closure to his victims.

Yoder, who died in 1997 at age 70, was a longtime faculty member and president at a Mennonite seminary in Elkhart and also taught for 30 years at the University of Notre Dame.

Allegations that Yoder had sexually abused, harassed and assaulted women circulated for decades, and were publicly reported in 1992, although he never was charged with any crime. Many of the women were students or others Yoder met through his academic and religious work.

The allegations about his behavior toward women ranged from groping to pressure to disrobe to sexual contact.

The Elkhart seminary and Mennonite Church USA each are taking steps to reach out to Yoder's victims and accept responsibility for lack of action at the time.

"This event is an opportunity for us to say publicly how our efforts were ineffectual and to publicly express our accountability," said Mary Klassen, communications director at the seminary.

The seminary board last fall issued a statement acknowledging the pain suffered by Yoder's victims: "As an AMBS Board, we lament the terrible abuse many women suffered from John Howard Yoder. We also lament that there has not been transparency about how the seminary's leadership responded at that time or any institutional public acknowledgement of regret for what went so horribly wrong. We commit to an ongoing, transparent process of

institutional accountability which the president along with the board chair initiated, including work with the historian who will provide a scholarly analysis of what transpired."

Yoder was one of the nation's most influential pacifist theologians. In his teaching and books, including "The Politics of Jesus," published in 1972, he helped many people formulate opposition to violence.

Yoder earned bachelor's and master's degrees at Goshen College. He was married for 45 years, and he and his wife had four daughters and two sons.

Yoder started teaching in 1958 at Goshen Biblical Seminary, where he was president from 1970 to 1973. It later merged with Mennonite Biblical Seminary and today is known as Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary. He began as an adjunct theology faculty member at Notre Dame in 1967, and was a full-time faculty member there from 1984 until his death in 1997.

The allegations of sexual misconduct by Yoder were reported in a 1992 series in the Elkhart Truth, and picked up by other publications. It became known that his 1984 departure from the Elkhart seminary resulted from complaints filed by at least eight women.

The number of women Yoder victimized is estimated at 50 to more than 100, according to research detailed in a comprehensive report by Rachel Waltner Goossen published in January in Mennonite Quarterly Review.

Goossen, who never met Yoder, is a Mennonite scholar and a history professor at Washburn University in Kansas. She was a professor at Goshen College in the late 1990s.

Goossen's work was requested by the board of the Elkhart seminary and Mennonite Church USA. She was not paid for her research or article.

She interviewed 29 people, including five of Yoder's victims. Most of those interviewed were Yoder's colleagues and Mennonite church administrators from the 1970s to the 1990s.

Yoder "had been an abuser of women over a long period of time," Goossen said in a telephone interview. "Women who had been victimized by him hadn't really been acknowledged in any significant way."

When she agreed to take on the project, Goossen said she would do it as long as she was provided full access to the seminary's records on the Yoder matter, including the files

of Marlin E. Miller, seminary president from 1975 until his death in 1994, which had been kept sealed at an attorney's office.

She also stipulated that those records would have to be made publicly available to other scholars and the public. The Miller files and all the other records she researched are now available at the Mennonite Church USA archives at Goshen College, Goossen said.

Goossen found documents among Miller's files indicating that Yoder's victims included Notre Dame women.

The Miller files refer to two unnamed women who suffered sexual abuse by Yoder at Notre Dame, but opted not to take legal action, according to Goossen's report.

In 1984, when Yoder was required to leave his position at Goshen Biblical Seminary because of complaints by women, he informed the Rev. Richard McBrien — then chair of Notre Dame's theology department — that he would be leaving the seminary and that the decision had "delicate dimensions," according to the Miller files. Yoder added: "I and others in the Mennonite context would be grateful if you could avoid giving the matter unnecessary prominence," Goossen quotes from the files.

Miller warned Yoder that "some (women) there (at Notre Dame) talk among themselves and tell others to 'look out for some of the priests and Prof. Y,' " Goossen wrote, quoting from the Miller files. Miller also cautioned Yoder not to jeopardize his employment at Notre Dame, according to the files.

Goossen said she sought to interview McBrien, but was not able to. The priest died in January after a lengthy illness.

The South Bend Tribune contacted Notre Dame officials to ask if there is any record of complaints about Yoder while he was an employee. Notre Dame doesn't comment on personnel matters, university spokesman Dennis Brown said.

In 1992, after victims pressured the church to take action, Yoder's ministerial credentials were suspended and he was ordered into church-supervised rehabilitation, according to Goossen's report. Yoder's accusers never spoke publicly, and his sexual misdeeds weren't mentioned in a lengthy obituary published in the New York Times.

"It is not easy for us as a community to admit this," said Klassen, the seminary communications director. "This is not easy for the faculty members or the victims. We hope this (event) will offer some healing for victims and their families."

mfosmoe@sbtinfo.com

574-235-6329

@mfosmoe

• On March 22 there will be a gathering for sharing, reflection and prayer for those who were victims of Mennonite theologian John Howard Yoder at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart. The session is open to women harmed by Yoder's action, their family members and supporters, and members of the current and former faculty, administration and seminary board.

• That afternoon there will be a worship service. Administrators and board members plan to express sorrow for the harm done. For more details, see: www.ambs.edu.

• An excerpt from a comprehensive report published in January on the allegations against Yoder by Rachel Waltner Goossen is available online at: themennonite.org.