Religion

Mennonites apologize for history of sex abuse following theologian John Howard Yoder scandal

By Rich Preheim | Religion News Service July 7

From seminars to a service of lament to a statement confessing its failure to offer healing for survivors, sexual abuse was a prominent topic at the Mennonite Church USA's biennial convention, which concluded Sunday (July 5).

Not prominently mentioned, but on many people's minds, was the denomination's complicity in the rampant sexual violations by one of its most distinguished members, the late theologian John Howard Yoder.

The revelations of sexual violence committed by one of the most influential shapers of Christian pacifism have left many people grappling with the incongruity.

"The impetus for these initiatives was 'We don't want this to happen again,'" said Hannah Heinzekehr, director of communications for the denomination.

A lifelong Mennonite who died in 1997, Yoder was one of the greatest theologians of the 20th century. Many of his books remain in print, including the classic "The Politics of Jesus," first published in 1972 and called one of the 10 best books of the 20th century by Christianity Today.

Yoder was also a major force in the Mennonite Church, a 100,000-member denomination that traces its origins to the Swiss Anabaptist movement of the 16th century.

Yoder became a superstar at the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Ind., where he taught for 24 years, respected and admired by fellow church members and Christians who were not Mennonite. Yet, at the same time, he was preying on women, many of them his students. A report has revealed a range of sexual offenses, starting in the mid-1970s, as well as the church's efforts to keep them quiet.

Researched and written by Rachel Waltner Goossen, a Mennonite and history professor at Washburn University in Topeka, Kan., the report was published in the January issue of the academic journal Mennonite Quarterly Review.

According to Goossen, Yoder wanted to develop a new sexual ethic, including the idea that intimate physical contact was an appropriate expression of nonerotic Christian love, and asked select female students to help.

While some were able to fend off Yoder's advances, which Goossen described as "recruitment," other women accepted the invitation. Their "research," consisted of sexual activity, such as fondling, oral sex and occasionally even intercourse.

The seminary's former president, Marlin Miller, learned of Yoder's activities shortly after becoming president in 1975 and tried to convince Yoder that his theology was flawed. The scholarly discussion continued for nearly a decade, abetted by Yoder's periodic threats of legal action.

In 1979, Miller finally directed him to stop his "experiments" and five years later forced Yoder's resignation. Yoder moved to nearby University of Notre Dame, where he remained until his death 13 years later.

(At Notre Dame, Yoder accosted at least two women, Goossen reported. The university has declined to comment, claiming it's a personnel matter.)

Miller told no one — not even the seminary board. And no explanation was ever given for his leaving the seminary.

The church eventually disciplined Yoder in 1992. The reason given publicly was for unspecified violations of "sexual boundaries."

In 2013, the seminary and the denomination began a process revisiting the church's handling of the Yoder affair. Victims and their supporters pushed for full disclosure of the abuse claims. Among their complaints was that the church had largely ignored the women's welfare and was more concerned with restoring Yoder and his reputation.

"Whether through misnaming, or negligence, or avoidance, or fear of scandal, we failed … what we know to be most true about the Gospel," Sara Wenger Shenk, seminary president since 2010, told the victims during a March service in which the seminary publicly apologized. "We failed you."

According to some estimates, Yoder may have accosted more than 100 women. One of them was Carolyn Holderread Heggen. "I continue to feel a deep sense of

relief and healing that the truth was finally acknowledged and confessed," she said.

Meanwhile, questions remain about Yoder's theological legacy. What to do when one of the outstanding proponents of peace and nonviolence has failed in interpersonal relations?

Already in 2013, the North American Mennonite publisher Herald Press began adding a statement to its 16 Yoder books, noting, "We believe that Yoder and those who write about his work deserve to be heard; we also believe readers should know that Yoder engaged in abusive behavior."

William Schweiker, president of the Society of Christian Ethics, said academics will give Yoder the same scrutiny they've given to others, such as philosopher Martin Heidegger and his controversial Nazi connections.

"In these ways, scholarly communities carry out the pursuit of knowledge and truth and monitor the work of scholars," said Schweiker, professor of theological ethics at the University of Chicago.

Earlier this year in England, a recent book generated a backlash because it favorably cited Yoder without mentioning his misconduct.

Krish Kandiah, president of the London School of Theology, told the British website Christian Today: "You at least have to engage with it, you can't just ignore that part of his life. Imagine how it feels if you're a victim of sexual abuse and your abuser is still being used as a source of Christian ethics."

Karen V. Guth, a theologian at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minn., agrees that scholars need to be transparent about Yoder's abuse, emphasizing "healing for the women he violated and the problem of sexual violence" rather than "salvaging Yoder's theological legacy," she said.

"Anyone who wants to move forward should incorporate feminist insights about sexism and abuses of power into their work," added Guth. "We all need to be concerned about how to combat sexual violence."