

**“Defanging the Beast”:
Mennonite Responses to John Howard Yoder’s Sexual Abuse**

RACHEL WALTNER GOOSSEN*

During the mid-1970s, the renowned Christian ethicist and theologian John Howard Yoder embarked on an experiment in human sexuality, devising his own guidelines and selecting his own subjects, whom he called “sisters.” Writing in 1979 to his colleague and supervisor, Marlin E. Miller, the president of Goshen Biblical Seminary in Elkhart, Indiana, Yoder laid out a continuum of activities in which he and a number of women had engaged:

- superficial touch as a natural greeting
- discussion of possible deeper meaning of touch
- more meaningful touch; may be a handclasp, a hug, or a brief kiss
- Same expressions as above but they become an expectation
 May be added a closed door, lap-sitting, a less fleeting kiss.
- token partial disrobing
- total disrobing
- specific touching of penis/pubis
- exploration of partial/interrupted arousal/intermission

“Other variables,” Yoder continued, “cut across these”:

- Whether just once as a threshold experience or repeated;
- whether done alone or with others present;
- whether the token nudity was a few minutes or longer.¹

*Rachel Waltner Goossen is a professor of history at Washburn University (Topeka, Kan.) The author initiated this study at the invitation of Mennonite Church USA’s Discernment Group.—<http://www.mennoniteusa.org/historian-to-examine-churchs-response-to-john-howard-yoders-abuse-of-women/>. Washburn University provided funding through a Faculty Research Grant. John Bender, Carolyn Holderread Heggen, James Lapp, Greg Leatherman Sommers, Ted Koontz, Walter Sawatsky, Dorothy Nickel Friesen and others assisted in providing documentation. Previously inaccessible institutional materials consulted for this project include the Anabaptist Mennonite Biblical Seminary (AMBS) Marlin E. Miller Files on John Howard Yoder, X-18-001, and the Mennonite Church USA Indiana-Michigan Conference John Howard Yoder Files, II-05-019. Both collections are now available at the Mennonite Church USA Archives in Goshen, Ind. Additional AMBS files are also available at MC USA Archives–Goshen. Prairie Street Mennonite Church records