

The New York Times

John Smyth, Christian Camp Leader Accused of Beatings, Dies at 77

By **Ellen Barry**

Aug. 15, 2018

John Smyth, an evangelical Christian leader and anti-gay campaigner who was dogged by allegations that he physically abused boys at elite Christian summer camps but was never formally charged, died on Saturday at his home in Bergvliet, South Africa, near Cape Town. He was 77.

The cause was heart failure, his family said.

Mr. Smyth, a lawyer, moved to Zimbabwe in the mid-1980s shortly after an internal inquiry carried out by the Iwerne Trust, a Christian charity that runs camps in Britain, determined that he had given boys there savage beatings with bamboo canes, causing bleeding, bruises and welts that lasted for months.

The Iwerne Trust did not refer Mr. Smyth to the authorities or make its findings public, though the report detailed multiple offenses. He went on to set up a similar chain of summer camps in Zimbabwe, where there were also allegations of brutal beatings. He then moved to South Africa, where he became a prominent evangelical activist and campaigner against same-sex marriage.

The allegations against Mr. Smyth did not come to light until 2017, when they were reported by Channel 4 news in Britain.

Mark Stibbe, an author and former Anglican clergyman who spoke publicly about the abuse he suffered, said a few days before Mr. Smyth died that he had received notice that British prosecutors were preparing to question Mr. Smyth and perhaps bring criminal charges against him.

“To get so close to the possibility of Smyth facing justice, being tried, and then to have it ripped away eight days later, you can understand there’s a mixture of anger and disappointment,” he said in an interview. He added, however, that news media coverage of the allegations had weighed heavily on Mr. Smyth.

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Mr. Smyth and his wife, Anne, had been formally excommunicated from their Cape Town church after it was alleged that he had been cultivating friendships with young men, showering with them and questioning them about pornography and masturbation.

“One or two of us think he was already facing a form of justice,” Mr. Stibbe said. “He was pretty well under self-imposed house arrest in South Africa. His neighbors hated him, because they knew what he had done.”

Mr. Smyth’s victims, now men in their 50s, said he had routinely selected a small group of favorite boys to join him for Sunday dinners and gradually persuaded them to submit to beatings in a soundproofed garden shed, as penance for such sins as masturbation and pride. Most were in boarding school, far from their families, and feared that if they reported what had happened the beatings would be dismissed as a normal part of England’s elite boarding-school culture.



Winchester College, a boarding school in Hampshire, England, where Mr. Smyth met many of his victims. He was accused of sadistically beating boys from the school and camps after befriending them. Rex Features, via Associated Press

“I remember being so appalled by how vicious the first lash was that I couldn’t scream,” Mr. Stibbe said. “You’re in this tiny shed full of canes with this man. I felt utterly powerless.”

Andrew Watson, the Anglican bishop of Guildford, said he had once been beaten by Mr. Smyth in the garden shed and called the experience “violent, excruciating and shocking.”

Mr. Smyth never denied the allegations against him. He told acquaintances that the beatings had been an element of religious discipline and misunderstood.

The scandal involving Mr. Smyth drew in Justin Welby, the archbishop of Canterbury, who had worked at the Iwerne holiday camps and knew Mr. Smyth. Last year, the archbishop issued an “unreserved and unequivocal” apology on behalf of the church, saying that he had not known of the allegations and that they should have been reported to the police.

But some of Mr. Smyth’s victims were skeptical, noting that the cleric who wrote the report, the Rev. Mark Ruston, was a close friend of the archbishop’s.

Winchester College, the boarding school where Mr. Smyth met many of his victims, said last year that its headmaster had met with Mr. Smyth and had forbidden him to contact its students. But the school decided not to make a police report, it said, for fear of further traumatizing them.

John Jackson Smyth was born on June 27, 1941, in Calgary, Alberta, the son of Edgar Smyth, a physician, and Ursula Lucie (Ross) Smyth. He graduated from St. Lawrence College in Kent and Cambridge University.

As a lawyer, he represented the conservative Christian activist Mary Whitehouse when she accused the magazine *Gay News* of blasphemy. He said of a poem the magazine had published, “It may be said that this is a poem about love; it is not, it is a story about buggery.”

Later, while living in South Africa, he unsuccessfully opposed the legalization of same-sex marriage, arguing in court that “in both testaments homosexual acts are condemned in very strong language.”

He is survived by his wife; his son, P. J., a pastor; and his daughters, Carolyn and Fiona. Another daughter, Nicola, died before him.

A version of this article appears in print on Aug. 17, 2018, on Page B13 of the New York edition with the headline: John Smyth, 77, Christian Camp Leader Accused of Viciously Beating Young Men