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## Theologian cited in sex inquiry

By TOM PRICE

Yoder, professor of Christian ethics

allegations, they said, precede and

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### Theologian cited in sex inquiry

ELKHART - The ministerial credentials of John Howard Yoder, regarded as one of this century's leading theologians and ethicists were suspended Saturday by a regional Mennonite Church commission over allegations of sexual misconduct

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

"The charges brought by the women are accurate, and John has violated sexual boundaries," according to a task force at Prairie Street Mennonite Church, of which Yoder is a member. "John has acknowledged the truth of the charges and has expressed deep regret for the hurt his actions have caused for the women."

Yoder has agreed to the course of restitution, including therapy, recommended by the task force and by the Church Life Commission of the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite conference, which took the action. The commission released statements from both panels after informing Yoder of their decision Sunday.

Although the panels did not elaborate about the nature of the allegations, three of the eight women told *The Elkhart Truth* most of the incidents took place in the 1970s through mid-1980s when Yoder was President and a professor of theology at Goshen Biblical Seminary here. Some allegations, they said, precede and follow his tenure at the Mennonite Church seminary affiliated with AMBS.

The women, who are on positions of national church leadership, said the allegations included improper hugging, use of sexual innuendo or overt sexual language, sexual harassment, kissing or attempts to kiss women, nudity and violent 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, inappropriately 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 this morning, terming the task force's statement as "less accurate" than that of the commission. "Both of them have the right to attribute things to me that they have attributed to me."

Yoder declined further comment. "It's in the hands of two church agencies, one in 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 to the public."

"I am not privy to the facts of the situation," said Lawrence S. Cunningham, chairman of Notre Dame's theology department. "I am distressed to hear about the action of the Mennonite Church. But is my understanding that these events occurred before professor Yoder came to Notre Dame. It is not clear to me

that his standing in the university is affected by the actions of his church. That is not to say that the university condones that kind of behavior."

"The goal of the task force was to work for repentance, restoration and healing for all who have been hurt by John's actions" the statement said. "Our conversations were open, confrontive, frank and sometimes filled with emotion."

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.

Although the commission could have revoked Yoder's credentials, its suspension will allow him to seek restoration after a period that has yet to be determined, said David R. Helmuth, commission chairman and pastor of First Mennonite Church in Middlebury.

Yoder was ordained in 1973, but has never served in a pastoral role.

"John has recognized the deep rifts to integrity and trust which 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 which violate church standards."

The task force said 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 his 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 Yoder ended his seminary employment. Since then, he has taught Christian ethics at the University of Notre Dame, where he was an adjunct faculty member since 1977 on a part-time basis.

"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. Goshen Biblical Seminary and the General Conference Mennonite Church's Mennonite Biblical Seminary now share facilities, faculty and staff as the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. Yet another source said a mutual decision for Yoder to leave the seminary "took the seminary off the hook for this complicated problem and enabled them to say they had no responsibility" for acting on allegations concerning a former employee.

With the exception of a couple of invitations to speak to seminary classes as late as 1985 Yoder has not been invited to speak at the seminaries, Miller said.

A second investigation, initiated by Prairie Street elders in 1985-86, never got off the ground because no woman would come forward for a face-to-face confrontation with Yoder, sources said. Yoder, who was overseas much of the latter half of 1991, wasn't informed of the current process until August and didn't meet formally with the task force until March 14, when he was presented with the allegations.

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July 12, 1992 - XXX

*This series examines allegations of sexual misconduct against noted theologian John Howard Yoder and the impact of the Mennonite Church's suspension of his ministerial credentials. Religion writer Tom Price conducted interviews over a three-month period with church leaders, theologians and three of the eight women who brought the allegations to a church panel. This series of five articles has been reordered to focus on examination of the culture surrounding these matters rather than speculation about Yoder's future. The original order of the articles was (1) Theologian's future faces a 'litmus test', (2) Theologian accused, (3) Church slow to explore rumors against a leader, (4) Yoder actions framed in writings, (5) Teachings tested.*

## **Theologian accused**

### **Women report instances of inappropriate conduct**

ELKHART - The allegations of sexual misconduct that led a Mennonite panel to suspend theologian John Howard Yoder's ministerial credentials extend beyond the eight women who were willing to testify to a congregational task force.

The eight women's allegations that led to the June 27 church action against Yoder, one of this century's leading theologians, represent "just the tip of the iceberg," according to one of the women who spoke, to a task force at Prairie Street Mennonite Church, one of two church panels involved in the investigation.

The women said their group is aware firsthand, by name, of about 80 other women with allegations of sexual misconduct against Yoder, professor of Christian ethics at the University of Notre Dame and a former professor at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries here.

"I know it has international dimensions," said Clara, who has a prominent leadership position in a national Mennonite institution.

Three women contacted by *The Elkhart Truth* requested anonymity for varying reasons, including fear that Yoder would retaliate. They are identified as "Tina," "Clara" and "Colleen." Although their identities are anonymous to readers, they are known to the task force. That group, however, has not told Yoder the identities of the eight women, leaving him uncertain about who has made the allegations.

THE WOMEN SAID the misconduct, which took place primarily from the 1970s through the mid-1980s, 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.

Of all the reported allegations, the accusations made by Colleen, a congregational leader, are the most serious.

According to Colleen, Yoder was invited in October 1977 to her home by her husband, "Joe," who asked the theologian to speak at their church's weekend meetings. They had known each other for several years.

Joe was away for most of the weekend leading a retreat and wasn't due back until Sunday afternoon, "I had no reason to mistrust John," said Colleen, who then had two small children. "After I had put the kids to bed, I came down to the living room. John was sitting on the couch. He moved closer to me as we were sitting on the couch. He kept coming closer and closer to me and eventually pushed me over and lay down on top of me. I was very afraid. I began to push him away. He began to shake violently... When I pushed him away and confronted him, he denied there was anything sexual about it."

AFTER A SLEEPLESS night, Colleen invited a single female friend to spend the next night for her protection. "John was visibly upset when he saw her come in," said Colleen, who tried to avoid him the rest

of the weekend, at one point hiding in a closet when she saw him coming. "He found me in there and made fun of my fears."

When her husband returned, Colleen told him what happened. The couple wrote Yoder a letter, expressing their outrage. "We wanted some explanation of his behavior," she said. "He never wrote us back."

Although the couple had known Yoder for some time, they were then unaware that some students privately discussed questions about his behavior when they were part of the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries community.

"There were a few of us (female students) at the seminary who were at that point experiencing what we called strange behavior," said "Clara," who first met Yoder in the early 1970s. "We talked about it with each other. That was the extent of it. We chalked it up (as), 'This man is strange. He is awkward. He doesn't know how to relate. The best thing is to stay away from him.'"

Clara, who did not have a close student-professor relationship with Yoder, said she initially experienced only "inappropriate hugs" from Yoder when he would close the door when she went into his office. "I would let him know that I was not comfortable with that," she said.

BUT SHE BECAME "very suspicious" about Yoder when in the mid-1970s she learned of his research on singleness. "He sent me a letter one time from Jerusalem when he was there and asked some very, very explicit questions, wanting an explicit response from me about how I, as a single woman, dealt with my sexuality."

In the letter, Yoder told Clara to write him at a private Jerusalem address, which she considered "really strange because I was a good friend of his wife," she said.

Yoder's alleged sexual harassment escalated when he returned to the seminary in the fall of 1976, according to Clara. "At that point, he began to come uninvited to my apartment. I was a single woman at the time," she said. "While his behavior was not inappropriate, coming to my apartment was. I felt like he was infringing on my space. I had a very frank discussion with him and told him I did not want him to come to my apartment, nor did I want him to have any other contact with me."

"I remember literally pushing him away from me at one point, (telling him). 'This is not appropriate. Do not touch me,'" she said. "He quit. He let me go at that point."

Another "inappropriate hug" left a lasting impression with Tina, who first met Yoder at a conference and still remembers their parting conversation. "I reached out my hand to shake his hand. He said, 'Give me a proper goodbye.'"

"John gave me this huge hug and held me against his body. It was too long and it was too much. (At first) I didn't think anything about it. What a strange old man. He's out of touch with his body."

Nevertheless, Yoder initiated a correspondence between them in the early 1980s. "I realize now that it was intellectual seduction. For a Mennonite woman who is bright to be taken seriously in the church doesn't happen very often," she said. To have John Howard Yoder acting like my ideas were profound and significant - it was real heady stuff. He probably wrote me five times for every time I wrote him. He was a wonderful resource. He started networking me with women around the world. It was incredible to me that he knew women around the world."

At first, the letters were addressed to Tina and her husband. One day, Tina said Yoder told her not to write him either at his home or office. Instead, he gave her the number of a post-office box, P.O., Box 93, in Osceola - a number, Tina said, Yoder gave to other women as well.

Yoder frequently suggested that Tina meet him at conferences, which she never did. "There were also frequent references to my body," she said. In one letter, Yoder suggested that Tina meet him for her conference, bring her baby along and meet him in his hotel room when he finished his day.

"Then he went into this bizarre, long, detailed description of what it would be like for him to sit in a chair and watch me sit on his bed, take off my clothes and nurse my baby. He described in vivid detail my breasts and other body parts," she said. "When I read the letter, I felt I had been raped. The thought of this dirty old man sitting at his seminary desk fantasizing about my nude body was terrifying to me, and I felt extremely violated and angry. I had never done anything to communicate to him that I was interested in anything but a mentor-protégée relationship."

Tina told her husband about the alleged incident and the letter. Then she wrote Yoder, 'told him how angry I was, how inappropriate' his actions were and asked him not to write again. But Yoder continued to write, saying she misunderstood what he meant, according to Tina.

Although Yoder continued to write, Tina responded only once, explaining the inappropriate nature of his actions. Tina has since destroyed Yoder's letters, fearing her children would discover them and misinterpret her involvement in the relationship.

Thia said Yoder asked her frequently to meet him at scholarly conventions, but never at Mennonite Church meetings, telling her he didn't like big Mennonite gatherings.

"I understand now why he doesn't," Tina said. "There must have been dozens of young women who felt they had this special mentor-protégée relationship with John, and if they all gathered in the same place it would be embarrassing for John."

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## **Yoder declines to respond**

John Howard Yoder has declined to respond at this time to the specific allegations raised in this article, saying, "This is not the time — I'm not sure there would be a time — for public exchange on this kind of thing."



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## **A KNOWN SECRET**

### **Church slow to explore rumors against a leader**

GOSHEN - When scholars gathered in May for a conference on church-discipline processes last month at Goshen College, they perhaps didn't realize what took place beneath the surface of the discourse.

Theologian John Howard Yoder participated in planning the conference and attended many sessions, as did people involved in virtually all aspects of the ongoing church-discipline process involving him.

Many participants will little note nor long remember what was said there. But in retrospect they may never forget the nearly two decades of silence before the June 27 decision by a regional Mennonite Church commission to suspend Yoder's ministerial credentials over allegations of sexual misconduct.

HOW COULD RUMORS about allegations of sexual misconduct against a prominent church leader circulate for so long that they become known in wide Christian circles, but never publicly acknowledged?

"A lot has been learned in the past 10 to 12 years about how the allegations should be dealt with," said Clara, one of eight women who brought allegations against Yoder. "The assumption back then was you keep these things quiet and you assume, and hope, they will go away."

Increased public attention to sexual harassment and authority abuse within the last decade has prompted churches to find ways to address the concerns brought forward by victims, although many still are reluctant to publicly reveal allegations for fear of ruining an individual's reputation.

But concerns about false allegations do not outweigh concerns for public confrontation of allegations of authority abuse, according to James Lapp, general secretary of the Mennonite Church General Board, "The church has been more seriously charged with complicity in a coverup. That must end," Lapp said in an interview before departing for an overseas mission trip. "The church must be on the side of healing, reconciliation and hope for victims, and not participate in their further victimization through silence."

THE WOMEN SAID church leaders were slow to address the allegations of misconduct against Yoder, not because they wanted to cover it up, but because they feared a confrontation with their most prominent leader. And some of the women, such as Clara, told only close friends about their experience - making it difficult for any investigation. Clara only told someone outside her circle of intimates when approached in the late 1970s by Marlin Miller, then president of Goshen Biblical Seminary.

"The bigger they are, the harder it is to bring them into accountability," said Vaughn Moreno, co-chairman of a task force on domestic violence for two regional Mennonite bodies. "These things aren't dealt with publicly."

In addition, some of the eight Mennonite women sought ordination from the church.

"None of those women were at a point eight years ago where they were willing to sit down publicly with John, fearing that it might affect their chance of being ordained," said Tina, one of the eight women and a member of a national church board. "To confront Mr. Mennonite, a man of John's stature in the church, is terrifying. When you're dealing with a woman lay person in the church and John Howard Yoder, there is no way mediation will work because there is a gross imbalance of power."

ACCORDING TO THE women, Yoder used this to his advantage. "Ten to 15 years ago, the church stood by John's demands that he meet individually and alone with any of his accusers," said Colleen, a congregational leader. The women also became co-conspirators in the silence because they feared the likely public outpouring of anger directed at them, rather than at the source of the alleged misconduct.

"I feel the repercussion and the anger which is sure to come," said Clara, who is in a prominent position in a national Mennonite institution. Even before the allegations of misconduct became public, she could hear the question: "How can you destroy John Howard Yoder?"

"I think he's done that to himself," she said, "We're speaking up and saying we won't tolerate it."

At a concert, "Joe," a husband of one of the women, dedicated a song to someone close to him who had been violated by a role model - a person that individual never suspected. After the concert, a woman approached him, asking to speak to him privately about the song: "It's about your wife, isn't it?" she said. Joe acknowledged that it was.

"WITHIN A FEW minutes she said, John, aren't we?"

"John?" Joe replied.

"John Howard Yoder," said the woman, who told Joe that she, too, was a victim of Yoder's alleged sexual misconduct.

"She became one of those many who were victims - many of whom were known to the church community. But these women were not willing to be as open as they needed to be for the church to expose him," Joe said, describing the situation as "a painful, recurring litany."

Mennonites, whose Swiss-German ethnic origins tie many together as a family, have responded to allegations of sexual misconduct against their leaders much as a family would, according to Joe.

"You weep in private, but on the outside we kind of deny it," he said. "It hasn't been acknowledged. It has been a known secret."

But more than a decade of silence about Yoder's allegations of misconduct could produce explosive results.

IF OTHER WOMEN come forward, as Tina believes they will, the women's desk at the Mennonite Central Committee in Akron, Pa., will put them into contact with the support group formed by the eight women.

"I think it's going to be a real unsettling time in the church, because all the rules are changing," Tina said. "What this is going to say is, even if you are the leading theologian in the church, there are certain standards of ethical behavior and morality you're expected to meet. If you cross those, you can no longer count on your victims being quiet."

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## **Yoder actions framed in writings**

ELKHART - An unpublished essay by John Howard Yoder may confirm the contention of three women who say the past president of the Society of Christian Ethics constructed a biblical and ethical framework for his alleged sexual misconduct.

Yoder, a prominent theologian, justified "non-genital affective relationships" between two Christians - even those who are single or married to other spouses, according to three women with whom Yoder violated sexual boundaries, a Mennonite Church panel determined.

"As long as intercourse is not involved, it is not abusive or inappropriate behavior," Tina said, describing what Yoder allegedly told her and other women. "A sexual relationship between believers is OK even if you're married to someone else, as long as you don't have intercourse."

In interviews with *The Elkhart Truth*, three of the women who testified 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.

"He has certainly pushed the limits up to that very line," Tina said. "As the church's leading intellectual, he felt his job is to push the limits with these ideas."

Yoder wrote a 1975 memo called, "What is Adultery of the Heart?" In it, he analyzed Jesus' statement from the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5:28 - "But I tell you that anyone who looks at a woman lustfully has already committed adultery with her in his heart."

"What then is the 'adultery of the heart' which Jesus condemns? It is failing to see in another woman one's sister, seeing in her an object instead of a person," Yoder wrote. "By forbidding 'adultery of the heart,' Jesus forbids the morality of fear and taboo, for it is that which degrades women."

Yoder described the concept of "familial protection," which comes into play when a man perceives a woman to belong to his tribe or family, such as a sister, mother or daughter. Because men consider these women under their protection, those women cease to be sexual objects for the men and become persons, he wrote.

Yoder sought to extend that concept to the church, whose members traditionally have been described as "sisters and brothers."

"'Familial protection' can extend as far as the faith," he wrote. "Instead of the vicious circle in which taboos and anxiety dramatize and provoke erotic excitement, those relations can be de-dramatized, calmed by familiarity."

According to Yoder, this familiarity between brothers and sisters often has no need for physical expression. "But in cases of deeper sharing, especially if some particular trauma has been caused by taboos about the body, some corporal (bodily) expression - abrazo (an embrace), touching - can celebrate and reinforce familial security, far from provoking guilt-producing erotic reactions."

That phrase can have an entirely innocent interpretation. For instance, a woman who becomes distraught after describing childhood sexual abuse receives an affirming hug or a gentle touch on the hand from a man.

But like a half-finished jigsaw puzzle, the addition of other pieces can change the picture.

Colleen described in greater detail the conversation that took place between her and Yoder on that October 1977 after he allegedly forced himself on top of her.

"When I pushed him away and confronted him, he denied there was anything sexual about it," she said.

According to Colleen, Yoder specified in graphic language that he did not intend to have intercourse with her, because that would be incest with their relationship as "brothers and sisters" in the church.

"After Colleen's experience, I reread some of the stuff and was quite shocked at what I found here," said Joe, her husband and a former student of Yoder's at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. "I really think that John was assuming that he had the right to experience or demand or pursue acts of intimacy with other women that went far beyond the accepted boundaries. He clearly allowed himself that behavior because he had convinced himself this was a kind of intimacy that was permitted within the family of faith. That's what he tried to convince Colleen."

Joe said he tried to confront Yoder about his alleged behavior. "He has not been willing to acknowledge that he has violated our marriage covenant. He has invaded a covenanted relationship that was made within the Christian community to which he is committed," Joe said. "Anyone who is willing to be honest with himself knows what he is doing when he does this stuff."

According to Tina, Yoder's remarks sound familiar. "One of the lines he's used on a number of women I've met is, 'We are on the cutting edge. We are developing some new models for the church. We are part of this grand, noble experiment. The Christian church will be indebted to us for years to come,'" she said. "He maintains that it's even appropriate for two people, who may be married to other people, to be in bed nude together, as long as they don't have intercourse."

Yoder had several unpublished papers, which dealt with various themes related to sexuality. In addition, scholars routinely circulate drafts to test exploratory ideas against their colleagues' critiques.

"He would send us a manuscript on 'Singleness' and ask us to respond and send it back to him," said Clara, a student in the 1970s, "Frankly, I thought they were garbage. It wasn't my understanding of singleness at all."



Some of Yoder's unpublished papers remain in the library at the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries. Tina said the papers remain there for a reason.

"Nobody would publish them. He was so angry because he thought he was really on to something wonderful," she said. "In a bizarre way, he's a very ethical man. He's got to have an ethical system that supports his behavior. I think he was trying to build an ethical system to justify his behavior, and it just doesn't float. There were holes all over the place."

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## **Teachings tested**

### **Forgiveness, reconciliation in discipline**

ELKHART - For years, Mennonites have quietly discussed whether it is proper for them to use the writings of their most prominent pacifist and ethicist in light of allegations of forceful and unethical sexual conduct.

With the June 27 suspension of theologian John Howard Yoder's ministerial credentials over allegations of sexual misconduct, those discussions about Yoder's theological future have become public.

But some of the eight women who made the allegations say although they personally feel uncomfortable with using Yoder's works, they don't necessarily think the church as a whole must stop using them.

"How do you teach anything related to peace and justice in a Mennonite institution by ignoring Yoder's works, except to look like an ignorant scholar?" said "Joe," the husband of one of the women. The women insisted on anonymity but are identified by pseudonyms for clarity's sake.

"I cannot use his writings at this point. (I) feel that they're not at all credible," Clara said. "He does not live up to what he writes and what he speaks."

At the Associated Mennonite Biblical Seminaries, students and faculty have discussed what implications the church-discipline process could have toward their use of Yoder's writings, according to President Marlin Miller.

"John's writings on peace, non-violence and related topics are very significant. One cannot really address these issues without taking those writings into consideration," Miller said. "They stand on their own two feet, regardless of the allegations that have surfaced. I'm sure they'll continue to be used."

Yet Clara drew a distinction between the appropriateness of Yoder's work for her personal use and its use by the wider Christian community. "The church needs to be very honest and candid and raise questions about whether one can legitimately use his material, knowing his behavior patterns," she said. "His writings are legitimate, even if his behavior isn't."

Colleen no longer can read Yoder's works.

"(Because of the public suspension of Yoder's credentials) maybe they can use the text with some integrity," Colleen said. - "I really hope that all the work that he has done will not be destroyed by this."

"Whatever truth John discovered existed quite apart from whatever sin he may have committed," said Joe, who was one of Yoder's former students. "Whatever he managed to discover, we might as well use. Personally. It will take me some time to know how to appreciate his writing again."

The pivotal issue, however, is not the significance of Yoder's work, according to a theologian who shares Yoder's theological vision.

"It doesn't stand on its own. It stands within the community that has, made this kind of work possible," said Stanley Hauerwas, professor of theological ethics at the Duke University Divinity School in Durham, N.C. "John wouldn't want to separate person and work that way... We don't say his work is good irrespective of the kind of person he is. He knows he must acknowledge (any) wrong and seek forgiveness."

Hauerwas stressed those themes in an April 18 commencement address at Goshen College: "Forgiveness is (not) simply a matter of being told God has forgiven us," he said. "Unless we are able to tell one another the truth through the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation, we are condemned to live in a world of violence and destruction."

The statement reflected Yoder's own views on reconciliation and church discipline. "That address was written with this in mind," Hauerwas said. "The kind of process about what it means to be forgiven is what John's undergoing."

"What's going on in Elkhart is one of the more important things that can happen... The fact that they can take their biggest guy and not try to protect him from possible wrongs he has done is, I think, one of the most extraordinary testimonies," Hauerwas said, "It is to the Mennonites' great credit that they were able to engage in this kind of process."

"There's an enormous burden on that church to protect the heritage he is a part of," said James William McClendon, distinguished scholar-in-residence at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. "If he is slandered and defamed and abused, that's going to hurt all of us who are grateful for the enormously important work he's done for half a century."

Yoder's writings have taught Mennonites and other Christians a lot about church discipline. But his most significant teaching could result from his willingness to submit to his church's disciplinary action against him.

"The church task force's initiative in working with John to solve this problem and John's humbling himself to participate in the process that the task force sets out is a remarkable witness to the very themes of the church as alternative community, peacemaking, reconciliation, Christian discipleship and servanthood that his writings have taught so many of us," said Glen Stassen, professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. "There has been a great deal of pain for many people in all of this. But I am truly impressed with the way they are working together as a community. I wish my denomination could learn to be one-fourth as constructive in dealing with all of us sinners. It's a great witness to grace."

"John is the one who taught us that this is the way," Hauerwas said. "I think the way he has submitted to the church process is a testimony to John's life... We're witnessing a moral event that we haven't seen in ages. After the shock wears off among many people who are receiving the news, this may well result in a strengthening of John Yoder's influence,... When all is said and done, it's going to be enhanced not hurt, because he submitted to the process."

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## **Theologian's future faces a 'litmus test'**

**Yoder's response to allegations could determine standing in field**

ELKHART - How theologian John Howard Yoder responds to the Mennonite Church's suspension of his ministerial credentials over sexual-misconduct allegations could become a "litmus test" for how history judges his work.

The action by a regional church commission against Yoder, professor of Christian ethics at the University of Notre Dame, came June 27 after allegations were brought forward by eight women in positions of national church leadership.

The women said the allegations range from overt sexual language to forcible sexual behavior and took place primarily in the 1970s through mid-1980s when Yoder was President and a professor of theology at Goshen Biblical Seminary here.

Even though his ministerial status in the church remains in question, Yoder, even his critics acknowledge, deserves a prominent place in 20th-century American theology. The debate centers on just how significant that place will be.

"He's possibly the most creative and original Christian theologian at work in America today," said James William McClendon, distinguished scholar-in-residence at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. "We may have to go 100 years, 200 years down the road (to learn) whether that 'possibly' is 'actually.'"

"I think he should be recognized as one of the dozen great theologians of this century (internationally)," said Glen Stassen, professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky.

Yet a critic sees Yoder's influence as limited to "the left wing of the Reformation, which includes the Mennonite tradition and a penumbra around that.

"By and large, his views don't shape mainline Protestant thinking. They impact it. They cause us to think twice," said Gabriel Fackre, Abbot professor of Christian theology at the mainline Andover Newton Theological School in Union Center, Mass. "There are around the world in Europe, Asia and Africa people of far greater stature and influence than John Howard Yoder."

Just as there is disagreement on the extent of Yoder's theological impact, theologians disagree on the impact on his theological contributions of the action by the Church Life Commission of the Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference.

"Of course it's going to hurt," said Stanley Hauerwas, professor of theological ethics at the Duke University Divinity School in Durham, NC., noting that Yoder would not want to separate his actions from what he has taught. "Many people are just waiting to find an excuse not to have to take him seriously"

Yet Fackre is "of two minds" on whether the decision will impact Yoder's work. "Even people whose character is morally dubious can be instruments of God's purposes. Whatever is good and true in Yoder's teaching is not going to be disqualified by his moral failures and shouldn't be," he said. "On the other hand, you can't separate personal from theological issues."

Citing the ongoing debate between views of the church as the community of saints or haven of sinners, Fackre said the "perfectionist ethics" represented by Yoder are not sufficiently self-critical about moral or spiritual life.

McClendon, a Baptist, said Yoder's historical work "is not going to be lost to sight because of these sad events.

"There's a way in which man and work merge together in our minds, especially in theology," he said. "How John Yoder is viewed as a human being...depends upon the blessed and obedient-to-God outcome of the whole process."

Yoder represents the major challenge of Christian pacifism to proponents of the Just War tradition, represented by American theologian Reinhold Niebuhr (1892-1971); who urged Christians to consider the political consequences of their actions.

"(Yoder) is one of the figures that students would have to read if they're studying to work in theology or Christian social ethics," said Brooks Holifield, Candler professor of American church history at Emory University's Candler School of Theology. Holifield is writing the first history of American theology, due out by the year 2000.

"If you wanted to pick two people for debating the morally legitimate use of deadly force...the two people you'd probably pick are Reinhold Niebuhr and John Howard Yoder," said Larry Rasmussen, the Reinhold Niebuhr professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York. I would call him (Yoder) the most sophisticated and most articulate apologist for Christian pacifism."

Yet the church action, according to Rasmussen, "casts a pall" over Yoder's contributions to ethics, theology and pacifism.

"Much of what John's contribution has been and is stands on its own terms. At the same time, this is a case where what he's involved in personally is very intimately tied to what he advocates as a professional and in his writings. There is a credibility issue," said Rasmussen, a Lutheran. "To me, the test for John Yoder is the degree to which he himself places himself into the very process of accountability that he advocates in his writing."

Rasmussen said such action would include Yoder's seeking forgiveness for any wrong from both the women and God.

"This becomes a kind of litmus test for what he has been advocating, namely the church as the community of moral accountability, which then both forms its members and holds them as a community of disciples to accountability when they - as we all do - transgress the morality of the community," Rasmussen said.

Yoder, a 1947 Goshen College graduate, did his doctoral work in historical theology from 1950 to 1957 at the University of Basel in Switzerland. He was a pupil of Karl Barth, the famous Swiss-Reformed theologian who was the main force behind the 1934 Barmen Declaration, which criticized the German Christians' support for the Nazi regime.

"As Barth was to the German Christians in terms of challenging them about their loyalty to Hitler, so John has been to American Christians (in challenging their loyalty to the state)," said Hauerwas, a Methodist who became a pacifist because of Yoder's work.

Following World War II, Niebuhr's "Christian realism" had discredited pacifism among theologians. Yoder's definition of non-violence as centered in the person and work of Christ and the messianic community "decisively turned the tide" for Christian pacifists, said Hauerwas, a former chairman of Notre Dame's theology department.

Yet Yoder's interpretation of Christianity "has never been a majority view in the church," said Fackre, a member of the United Church of Christ. "(Yoder's) influence was never as wide as the devotees of Yoder and Hauerwas would like to believe.

"What he does is predictable," he said.

"Too often potential readers believe they can dispose of Yoder without even having read him, because they 'know' in what ways Mennonites are wrong-headed about non-violence. But Yoder, cannot be dismissed so easily," Hauerwas said. "John's work needs to be put squarely in the center of the Christian mainstream."

Yet despite questions of whether Yoder will conform to the long-term discipline process of his church, Rasmussen notes that there are larger issues involved.

"My larger question here is why male clergy, male theologians and male ethicists have had such an apparently difficult time abiding by the sexual norms that they themselves advocate," Rasmussen said. "It may reveal a deeper problem in the church, as well as John Yoder's own personal problems."

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## **SIDEBAR**

### **Theologian's work is highly regarded**

ELKHART - Despite the ongoing church discipline process involving him, theologian John Howard Yoder's name already will go into the theological history books for his accomplishments.

Although there is disagreement over the significance of his work beyond his Mennonite tradition, there are several points of agreement about Yoder's:

- Magnum opus, 'The Politics of Jesus,' (which) will go down as one of the great books of the 20th century in theology," said Stanley Hauerwas, professor of theological ethics at the Duke University Divinity School in Durham, NC.

- Reputation as "probably the best-known theologian coming out of the Mennonite world over the past two centuries," according to Hauerwas, a former chairman of Notre Dame's theology department. "There are two things most people know about Mennonites: There's the Amish billboard, and the other billboard is Yoder," said James William McClendon, distinguished scholar in-residence at the evangelical Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, Calif. "He's tended to put the Mennonite community on the map in a way that ethnic Mennonitism doesn't do it."

- Support for a biblical foundation for social ethics, which often tends to be abstract. "He has shown the inadequacy of that," said Glen Stassen, professor of Christian ethics at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. "He has paved the way into strong, biblical research to ground our Christian ethics."

- "Rather significant impact on the church ecumenical," said Larry Rasmussen, the Reinhold Niebuhr professor of social ethics at Union Theological Seminary in New York. Yoder represented Mennonites in discussions organized by the National Council of Churches and at World Council of Churches assemblies.

Yoder, 64, directed the Mennonite Central Committee's relief office from 1949 to 1954 in France, where in July 1952 he married his wife, Anne. He moved to Elkhart to teach seminary classes in 1958-59 before becoming administrative assistant for overseas missions for the Elkhart-based Mennonite Board of Missions. In 1965, he became a professor of theology at Goshen Biblical Seminary in Elkhart and director of its Institute of Mennonite Studies.

While at the seminary, he assembled an extensive course of writings and also taught at several other institutions. In 1970, he was named president.

In 1973 as laudatory reviews came out for "The Politics of Jesus," Yoder stepped down from his seminary posts. He also was ordained a minister that year by the Ohio District Conference of the Mennonite Church, although he never has served in a pastoral role.

After joining the Notre Dame faculty in 1977 on a part-time basis and full-time when he left AMES in 1984, Yoder served in 1988 as president of the Society of Christian Ethics, a scholarly organization.

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