Theologian cited in sex inquiry

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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 bought 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 tile 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.