Teachings tested: Forgiveness, reconciliation in discipline

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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 he 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."