

AMBS Statement on Teaching and Scholarship related to John Howard Yoder
February 27, 2012; approved April 30, 2012

In 2012, AMBS President Sara Wenger Shenk, Academic Dean Rebecca Slough, and teaching faculty member Ted Koontz organized three faculty conversations about John Howard Yoder's complicated legacy. This statement reports on shared agreements that will guide how AMBS faculty teach, critique, interpret, and use Yoder's work with integrity, recognizing the significance of his theological work and the wrongfulness of his actions. As a learning community, we expect to exercise greater freedom in speaking about the nature of his legacy and will post this statement in an accessible place for AMBS faculty, staff, and students.

John Howard Yoder's scholarly and personal legacies have presented opportunities and complications for AMBS over many years. His contributions to the Christian church through his scholarship and teaching have been innumerable. His behavior, however, wounded many women, some of whom were his students at AMBS. His creative, insightful, perhaps even revolutionary thinking on ethics, peace, and ecclesiology seem contradictory when set beside his inappropriate actions.

When AMBS colleagues and administrators became aware of Yoder's abusive behavior toward women, he was confronted. They worked diligently to hold him accountable over multiple years and when it became evident that their attempts were ineffective, he was asked to leave in 1984. Finally, in 1992 he submitted to a disciplinary process with Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference in response to charges of misconduct brought by a number of women.

The Church Life Commission of Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference took on leadership of the disciplinary process. The CLC formed an accountability and support group that met with John more than 30 times between fall of 1992 and spring of 1996. It also mandated that John undergo psychological evaluation and counseling, and suspended his ministerial credentials. The accountability and support group's final report stated that Yoder made sufficient changes in attitudes, beliefs, and behaviors to bring closure to the process. The Church Life Commission concluded its report by recommending continuing use of an accountability plan and encouraging "Yoder and the church to use his gifts of writing and teaching." In the latter part of 1997, shortly before Yoder's death, he was invited to again teach at AMBS as a substitute teacher for a professor who was ill, and he was also reconciled with his home congregation.

During their review of AMBS's history with John Howard Yoder in 2012, the faculty at AMBS noted these shared agreements for their use of Yoder's writings and theology in their teaching:

- We recognize that John's legacy is deeply connected with AMBS and that his thought should be freely evaluated, appropriated, or criticized by faculty and students.
- As faculty we agree that:
 - His work will be read appreciatively yet critically in light of its contributions to the fields of ecclesiology, ethics, peace, and justice;

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- His work has been and will continue to be read and evaluated within a broader context of scholars and practitioners, especially those who are addressing similar issues related to ethics, peace, and justice;
 - The tension created by his work on ethics, peace, and justice and his behavior that was hurtful to many women will be open for examination;
 - References to Yoder's submission to and completion of the disciplinary process with Indiana-Michigan Mennonite Conference will be made as appropriate with students, future faculty, and scholars;
 - Yoder will be presented as the complex person that he was—intellectually brilliant, deeply caring, generous, creative, shy, dismissive of persons who confronted him about his misuse of power, and manipulative while crossing boundaries with women.
 - Faculty will address forthrightly questions or issues raised as students consider the possible connections between his thought and some of his actions, and will examine what these writings communicate to vulnerable women, men and children.
 - AMBS will use particular care when utilizing his writing on singleness, marriage, and sexuality and how to interpret it.
- As a result of AMBS's experience with Yoder, we will continue to learn together and teach about:
 - The nature of power and authority and the issues that arise when they are used inappropriately and/or unwittingly;
 - The necessity of recognizing and maintaining appropriate physical and psychological boundaries, especially with those of lesser power and authority or greater vulnerability (especially among students, colleagues, and people inside and outside of the church);
 - Accountability for personal behavior at all times;
 - The obligation to treat accusations or incidents of misconduct, especially sexual misconduct, seriously and with appropriate urgency and ensuring that there is an effective grievance policy in place;
 - The necessity of and strategies for protecting vulnerable women, men, children, and anyone living on the margins of our communities and congregations.

In conclusion, we acknowledge that John Howard Yoder's theological legacy is proving to be widely influential and transformative for many persons. We are grateful that many people testify to a rediscovery of Jesus through Yoder's insightful writings. We also give thanks that the church's disciplinary process appears to have brought Yoder to repentance and restoration with at least some former colleagues and church family members before his sudden death.

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We regret the hurt that was inflicted by this flawed man and an accountability process that while good intentioned and effective in part, didn't go far enough to heal all wounds. We commit ourselves as faculty of AMBS to ongoing healing, forgiveness, and reconciliation in God's beloved community, while acknowledging that not everyone fully trusts Yoder's repentance. We will teach from Yoder and others who provide helpful theological perspectives with enhanced alertness to our own failures and a keen attentiveness to what in us contributes to life abundant and what stands in need of God's ongoing redemption.