



**Difference Maker**

## **Malcolm Boyd brought Christianity into the streets to promote civil rights**

Episcopal priest Malcolm Boyd has taken the message of Christianity outside the walls of church to champion minority rights and show that God is everywhere.

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By Gary G. Yerkey

LOS ANGELES

It would be natural to assume that, at almost 90 years old, the Rev. Malcolm Boyd has run out of steam. Yet here he is, still running. Running to fire up demonstrators demanding economic and social justice. Running to put together his latest column for national distribution. Running to deliver a major sermon at a packed church near downtown Los Angeles.

Running to inspire.

An Episcopal priest, writer, and activist, Mr. Boyd is also running these days as the subject of a full-length documentary film, due out later this year, by the award-winning filmmaker Andrew Thomas.

“He’s a whirling dervish of activity,” says Mr. Thomas, who met him several years ago while producing and filming a live performance at The Jazz Bakery in Culver City, Calif., featuring Boyd reading from his bestselling book of prayers “Are You Running With Me, Jesus?” which was published in 1965.

Boyd is often called on to serve as a “living symbol of righteous social struggle,” providing “gravitas” to progressive causes, Thomas says.

Today, Boyd admits to being “not as sprightly” as he used to be as he briskly climbs the stairs to his “writer-in-residence” office at the Cathedral Center of St. Paul, the headquarters of the Episcopal Diocese of Los Angeles. “It has not been an ordinary life,” he says, adding that he looks forward to his 90th birthday on June 8 with a sense of satisfaction. “I’ve been very fortunate with the way things have worked out.”

The way things have worked has meant writing some 30 books. It has meant breaking down barriers for African-Americans, gays, and other minorities through nonviolent civil disobedience and other means. And it has meant taking the message of Christianity out of the church and into the streets.

South African Anglican Archbishop Emeritus Desmond Tutu has said that Boyd’s “genius” has been to show that God is everywhere, “even for those who say they do not believe in God.

“He was ahead of his time, being a white civil rights prophet on behalf of people of color, protesting against tyranny and war, asserting God’s inclusivity for all people, including gays, and offering prayer in

actions as well as words,” Archbishop Tutu, a Nobel Peace Prize laureate, has said. Today, Boyd shares a place with Tutu as an “elder” – a “North Star” guiding younger generations “beyond treacherous waters,” Tutu says.

Boyd’s ministry today primarily involves offering spiritual direction to a dozen or so religious leaders and others, Boyd told the Monitor in a recent interview. He had spent his early years believing he was an atheist, he says. But in his late 20s, fed up with what had become a lucrative and lustrous – but spiritually unfulfilling – career in Hollywood, he decided to enter seminary.

He was ordained an Episcopal priest in 1955, at the age of 32. “I decided I didn’t want to be like those people [in Hollywood] in five years,” he says.

It was his involvement in the civil rights movement, however, that changed his life forever, beginning in 1961 when he was asked to join other Episcopal priests – black and white – on a “prayer pilgrim-



age” freedom ride from New Orleans to Detroit to protest the segregation of interstate bus routes in the South. People were being beaten and killed by those defending the Jim Crow laws of that time. Homes and churches were being burned and vandalized.

“I was afraid,” Boyd said in a recent sermon at St. John’s Episcopal Cathedral here. “This was way over my head. I had to make a choice. I decided I would go. But I had no idea what I was doing.” He made his decision “on faith.”

Surviving that experience led to a decade of heart-wrenching and often terrorizing involvement in the civil rights movement, even as he was called to serve as Episcopal chaplain at Wayne State University in Detroit. It included working on voter registration in Mississippi and Alabama, and touring black communities in the South on behalf of the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity.

It was the “most intense, and often harrowing, period” in his life, he says, and the most meaningful. “The cause of justice must always take precedence over other matters, both public and private,” he has written.

He also became a “rebel” within the Episcopal Church, he says, for example, reacting with anger and outrage to its “genuflection to racism” prior to the 1960s. His unorthodox approach to his priestly role led to his resignation in 1961 as Episcopal chaplain at Colorado State University, where, among other things, he had set up a church-related coffeehouse called The Golden Grape that was popular with students and featured poetry readings and dance.

“[It] smacked of the avant-garde and allegedly had overtones of ‘beatnik,’ “ he later recalled, paraphrasing the view of many townspeople in Fort Collins, Colo., the home of the university. “It must be closed.”

The Rt. Rev. Joseph Minnis, then-bishop of the Episcopal Diocese of Colorado, wrote in the diocese’s official publication that beatniks were prone to “the nonpractice of bathing and the wearing

of beards and black leotards.... You can't think of yourself as a beloved Son of God and at the same time go around with matted hair, dirty bodies, and black underwear."

To Boyd, this was "absolute heresy." He submitted his resignation immediately, saying he had found himself "in fundamental disagreement with the bishop concerning the nature of Christian evangelism."

Dubbed the "Espresso Priest," he appeared in the 1960s on college campuses and in coffeehouses sitting on a bar stool reading from "Are You Running With Me, Jesus?" and performing his own plays. In 1966, he found himself at the Newport Jazz Festival onstage alongside jazz guitarist Charlie Byrd. He also appeared that year at the hungry i, a famed San Francisco nightclub, for a month-long stint with comedian Dick Gregory, prompting The New York Times to call him "a latter-day [Martin] Luther or a more worldly [John] Wesley, trying to move religion out of 'ghettoized' churches into the streets where people are."

Later, he was involved in the antiwar movement, celebrating a peace mass during the Vietnam War, for instance, inside the Pentagon. It led, of course, to his arrest. And he fasted for a week to protest nuclear testing.

In 1977, he came out publicly as gay – one of the first Episcopal priests to do so – and in 1984 he met his life partner, the author and activist Mark Thompson. Recently, the city of West Hollywood, Calif., presented the couple with its prestigious Rainbow Key Award for decades of "outstanding contributions to the lesbian and gay community."

Today, Boyd serves on the advisory board of the White Crane Institute, a nonprofit gay rights organization based in New York. He insists, however, that despite his long involvement in the gay rights

movement, he is not a "single-issue person" – any more than he was in the past.

"Single-issue people are quite dangerous," he says. "They're obsessed, and they're usually shouting." Instead, he ticks off a long list of issues that concern him today: immigration reform, racism, marriage equality, gun violence, the "scandalous" condition of women around the world, environmental degradation, and the decline of organized religion.

Over the years he has served as priest at several Episcopal churches, including, for 15 years, St. Augustine by-the-Sea in Santa Monica, Calif. He was president of PEN Los Angeles Center, an affiliate of the London-based writers association PEN International, from 1984 to 1987.



Today, he might also consider himself to be something of an expert on aging – so much so, in fact, that he has written a book about it: "Simple Grace: A Mentor's Guide to Growing Older."

"I have explored hills and valleys of aging, crossed rivers, rested in meadows, engaged in dialogues, listened intently, worked hard, and met remarkable women and men," he writes. "I sought wisdom and serenity above silver and gold. Why should the story of my odyssey concern you? Because it is your story, too."