



Boyd, Malcolm (b. 1923)

by Caryn E. Neumann

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In 1977 Malcolm Boyd, an Episcopal priest and prolific author, became the first prominent openly gay clergyman in a mainstream Christian denomination in the United States.

Boyd was born in Manhattan on June 8, 1923, the only son of financier Melville Boyd and Beatrice Lowrie Boyd. After earning a B.A. in English from the University of Arizona in 1944, Boyd moved to Hollywood and obtained a job as a copywriter for Foote, Cone, & Belding Advertising Agency.

Boyd left advertising in 1947 to become a writer and producer for Republic Pictures and Samuel Goldwyn Productions. In 1949, he returned to New York to form Pickford, Rogers, & Boyd, a film and television production company with film stars Mary Pickford and Charles "Buddy" Rogers. Boyd's experiences are recounted in Eileen Whitfield's *Pickford: The Woman Who Made Hollywood* (1997).

Boyd left the film business in 1951 to enter a seminary. After receiving a B.D. from the Church Divinity School of the Pacific, he was ordained as an Episcopal priest in 1955. After additional study at Oxford University and the Ecumenical Institute of the World Council of Churches in Geneva, Switzerland, Boyd earned a S.T.M. from Union Theological Seminary in New York in 1956.

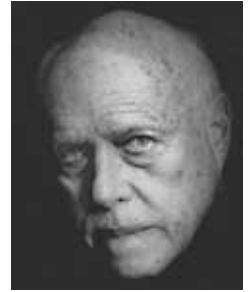
Boyd served for two years as the rector of a downtown parish, St. George's Episcopal Church, in Indianapolis. In 1959, he became the chaplain at Colorado State University. Eager to reach out to young people, Boyd sponsored a series of "espresso nights" and picked up the nickname "The Espresso Priest."

While Boyd believed that the Christian religion is essentially revolutionary, the Episcopal bishop of Colorado disagreed. Shocked by Boyd's beard and critical of the priest for introducing secular practices into worship services, the bishop publicly berated Boyd for his liberalism. In response, Boyd resigned.

The dispute did not significantly damage Boyd's reputation. *Life* magazine selected him as one of the "100 Most Important Young Men and Women in the United States" in 1962.

Boyd subsequently served both Wayne State University and Grace Episcopal Church in Detroit from 1961 to 1964. Influenced by his black parishioners and his belief in the missionary responsibilities of Christianity, Boyd took part in a Freedom Ride. Freedom Rides, organized by the Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) in 1961, were an attempt to integrate interstate transportation in the South. The riders were attacked by segregationist mobs.

Seeing the brutality of southern resistance to racial integration firsthand led Boyd to new insights on race and justice. He became more deeply involved with the Civil Rights movement. In Detroit, he wrote a weekly column for a black newspaper and took part in demonstrations. He later returned to the South to assist with registration of black voters.



A portrait of Malcolm Boyd by Stathis Orphanos.
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Along with a number of young leftist Protestants, Boyd joined Clergy and Laity Concerned. It was the largest ecumenical group opposed to U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War. He became the national field representative of the Episcopal Society for Cultural and Racial Unity in 1965.

Boyd's deep involvement in the Civil Rights movement is chronicled in Gardiner H. Shattuck, Jr.'s *Episcopalians and Race: Civil War to Civil Rights*. Boyd described this involvement in detail in his own book *As I Live and Breathe* (1970).

Boyd's social activism and writing reduced the time that he had available to serve as a priest. He held a position as assistant pastor to the Church of the Atonement in Washington, D. C. from 1964 to 1968 but took a leave to serve as chaplain-at-large to American universities and colleges beginning in 1965.

In the 1960s, Boyd began to edge out of the closet. He had experienced his first sexual relationship with another man in New York City in the mid-1950s but hesitated to accept his homosexuality. He came out unofficially in 1965 with his eloquent prayer "This is a Homosexual Bar, Jesus" in his best-selling book of prayers, *Are You Running with Me, Jesus?* The book led to an offer in 1968 to become writer-in-residence at Calhoun College of Yale University.

In 1977, Boyd publicly came out in an interview with the religion editor of the *Chicago Sun-Times*. In doing so, he became the first prominent openly gay clergyman of a mainstream Christian denomination in the United States. He also discusses the difficulties of being a gay Episcopal priest in his autobiography, *Take Off the Masks* (1978). In *Gay Priest* (1986), Boyd explores the painful spiritual journey forced upon any gay man who would be a priest.

Boyd returned to an active ministry in 1982 when he joined the staff of the St. Augustine-by-the-Sea Episcopal Church in Santa Monica, California. When the AIDS epidemic struck, he helped with the AIDS ministry of the Episcopal diocese of Los Angeles. He has been a member of the Los Angeles City/County AIDS Task Force since 1985.

In 1996, Boyd received an invitation to be poet/writer-in-residence at the Cathedral Center of Los Angeles.

An avid gardener and opera fan, he shares a home in the Silver Lake area of Los Angeles with his partner, writer and religious activist Mark Thompson. The two men have been together since 1984.

On May 16, 2004 Reverend J. Jon Bruno, the Episcopal bishop of Los Angeles, blessed the union of Boyd and Thompson to heavy criticism from conservatives. The men were the first to receive such a blessing since the Episcopal lawmaking body approved the practice earlier that year.

Boyd has been a leader in challenging anti-gay positions within Christian churches. The Episcopal Church does not sanction gay marriage and, for years, it held that that homosexuality was incompatible with Christianity. The changing stance of Episcopalians can be attributed in part to Boyd's influence.

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Caryn E. Neumann is a doctoral candidate in Women's History at Ohio State University. A past managing editor of the *Journal of Women's History*, her essays have appeared in the *Dictionary of American History* and *Notable American Women*, among other places.

