

Malcolm Boyd, the overlooked gay activist who pushed boundaries

by [Jay Michaelson](#)

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(RNS) Malcolm Boyd, who died on Friday (February 27) at the age of 91, lived three lives—and he gave each up for the next.

For the first third of Boyd's life, he was an A-list producer in Hollywood's golden age, most famously as a business partner of silent film actress Mary Pickford.

But in 1951, he gave up the glamorous life to become an Episcopal priest. His was an activist ministry. He was one of the Freedom Riders in 1961, he marched with Martin Luther King Jr. in Selma, and he got arrested for protesting the Pentagon. Boyd's renowned 1965 collection of contemporary prayers was called *Are You Running With Me, Jesus?*

And then, in 1977, he gave that life up too, coming out as gay and being scorned by his church and his community. But his activism was far from over.

Boyd held the first "AIDS Mass" in 1985. He and his partner Mark Thompson (his junior by 30 years—yet their intergenerational partnership lasted over two decades) were pioneers in the gay spirituality movement. And when their wedding was blessed at a Los Angeles cathedral in 2004, Boyd once again made the headlines.

Though in his later years Boyd wasn't well known outside the gay community, he wrote 28 books and edited half a dozen more. And last year, still blogging at age 90, he wrote in The Huffington Post that he was initially reluctant to join the civil rights movement.

He "was scared about drawing undue attention to myself" both for reasons of humility and, surely, safety as well. As the film *Selma* dramatizes, no one could predict what would happen at any particular demonstration. Even for someone with Boyd's white and clerical privilege, death itself was a real possibility.

An obituary in the gay publication *Frontiers Media* quotes a 1967 article describing Boyd as “a full time disturber of the peace, a jarring blend of Luther and Lenny Bruce, who is attempting to shock religion into being relevant.”

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