

Thomas Hoyt, Jr. (1941-2013)

Thomas Hoyt, Jr., died on October 27, 2013. A native of Alabama, he was a graduate of Lane College, Interdenominational Theological Center, Union Theological Seminary (New York City), and Duke University. A highly accomplished theological educator, passionate and fierce prophet of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue and collaboration, dedicated pastor and denominational leader, gentle soul prone to the infectious smile and hearty laughter, Hoyt was also a competent and activist scholar in the guild of biblical studies. At the Interdenominational Theological Center in Atlanta, at Howard University School of Divinity, and at Hartford Seminary he taught students the basics about and some of the unspoken and hidden things in relationship to the New Testament—with passion and in the radically free Black preacher’s voice.

The story of Hoyt’s quiet but visionary leadership and participation that changed the Society of Biblical Literature (SBL) from a discursive space in which issues of difference, especially racial-ethnic difference, were only whispered or denied to a rhetorical field in which a wide range of minoritized communities arrogate to themselves the right to hold forth must someday be told. Part of a generation in which African American members of the guild of biblical scholars were so few they could huddle and hear each other’s whispers in a corner in a hallway, a member of an elite group of highly trained individuals within his tribe who have always been pressed to wear multiple hats, to address mixed and multiple audiences with their many different social and political challenges, Hoyt was a

pioneer: he made his desperately needed presence and voice evident and sagacious enough so that a group he and a few others inspired, challenged and influenced could grow to speak loudly and freely. He taught scholars of color how to effect change in that part of the political-discursive and social-cultural regime that was the academic guild.

Before he decided with resolve to give his remaining high-energy years to the church community he loved, Hoyt was during the late twentieth century the leading figure among African Americans in the campaign to make SBL more open and responsive to, more subject to challenges by, peoples of color. As varied as are peoples of color in today's SBL, it was not so until African Americans and their campaigns in the 1980s led the way and opened doors for all other "others" to participate more fully in the discourses. It was Thomas Hoyt who in his quiet and unassuming way—never arrogating to himself a visible leadership role, wanting and demanding only that deeds be done in order to attain radical inclusion and respect for all voices—led the "underground" activities, beckoning to all in that inimitable twang, "Come on, now, y'all, let's get this thing going."

Hoyt was the engine—the conceptualizer, organizer, and fundraiser—behind the now famous and successful *Stony the Road* book project; he was also its heart and soul, even though he never claimed this truth. He was in fact the one indispensable figure in the whole project. And what that project and its success set in motion—including the first SBL program unit to name explicitly and embrace without apology social and racial-ethnic identities and positionalities as frameworks

for thinking and speaking freely and critically—has reverberated within and beyond SBL.

Hoyt's role in all such efforts must be told. His story has to do not with the writing of commentaries, articles, essays and monographs; not with control of an important guild committee; not with showy leadership of or identification with a school of thought or research method; not with guild recognition; but with integrity in social relations, with the skills of a facilitator of real conversation, and with the gentle voice and organizational skills of an institutional-ideological and social critic (no doubt informed by denominational politics). Thomas Hoyt helped make the guild of biblical scholars in North America a bigger, more diverse enterprise, a community now more aware of itself and of serious challenges and possibilities beyond itself. We owe Professor Hoyt our gratitude; even more, we owe him and ourselves the telling of the full story of the guild he helped shape.

Vincent L. Wimbush

2 November 2013