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**Andrew Foster:  
Establishing Deaf Education in Africa**

Alison Stow  
National Technical Institute for the Deaf  
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Andrew Jackson Foster II was born in Birmingham, Alabama on June 27th in 1925. His father worked in the coal mines (Van Cleve, 1987). At the age of 11, he contracted spinal meningitis and became profoundly deaf as a result of the high fever and medication. His brother also contracted the sickness and subsequently lost his hearing. According to Foster, the two brothers adjusted to their deafness relatively well (Hairston & Smith, 1983).

Foster attended Alabama School for the Colored Deaf in Talladega from the ages of 12 to 16. There he learned a regular course of study up to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade, considering that opportunities for black and deaf children were less-than stellar at that time. At the age of 17, Foster saw opportunities to work and gain economically in the industrial northern city of Detroit, so he moved there alone. After being denied admission to Michigan School for the Deaf based on non-residency status as well as probable racism (Michigan was more progressive than Foster's home state of Alabama, but northerners were also more discreet in their expression of racism), Foster found work in several factories, then booming due to high demand during World War II (Van Cleve, 1987).

With the encouragement of a local Vocation Rehabilitation counselor who had studied at Gallaudet College (the world's only college for deaf people in Washington, D.C.), Foster decided to continue his studies and picked up business courses from the Detroit Institute of Commerce. He simultaneously pursued his high school diploma through correspondence courses with the American School in Chicago. He received an Accounting and Business Administration Diploma in 1950, and his high school diploma in 1951. It was during his early-mid 20s where he worked full days and studied long into the evenings (Moore & Panara, 1996).

During this time in his life Foster also became highly involved in a religious congregation that directly served deaf people. This positive interaction with the church, and specifically the

deaf/signing community within the church, inspired Foster greatly and it was through these experiences that he decided to ultimately pursue ministry (Hairston & Smith, 1983). Perhaps a few impressionable memories were factors in his decision; it was during these years when Foster learned about deaf people's plight in Jamaica, and lack-of educational opportunities on the entire continent of Africa (Carroll & Mather, 1997). Foster's passion for education and ministry and the plight of underprivileged black deaf people around the world propelled him even more deeply into his own education and religious life, as he worked hard to better himself before serving others. Such themes of education and religious education became important to Foster during these formative years, and this focus remained a guiding light for him throughout his life. To reiterate a quote that Foster selected from the Bible, included in his essay titled *Twelve Scriptural Reasons*: " 'How shall they call on Him in whom they have not believed? And how shall they believe in Him of whom they have not heard? And how shall they hear without a preacher? And how shall they preach, except they be sent?' (Romans 10:13-15a)," (Foster, n.d.). Foster soon nominated himself to be the preacher sent to Africa to communicate with those who have not heard, but first he had many preparations to undertake.

Upon successful acquisition of his high school diploma, Foster was more than adequately prepared to attend Gallaudet College. He was accepted and started the program in 1951 on a congressional scholarship. Whereas most Gallaudet students took 5 years to complete their undergraduate degrees, Foster miraculously condensed the 5 years into 3 years and walked across the podium in 1954 as the first black graduate in Gallaudet's 90-year history. Foster had successfully earned a bachelors degree from the world's only liberal arts college for deaf people at a time when segregation was still strong in the United States. Foster's fast-paced success at Gallaudet is attributed to his taking summer classes the nearby Hampton Institute in Virginia, as

well as his incredible determination and earnest focus on schoolwork throughout his 3 years of study. Immediately upon graduation, Foster lost no time in earning his Masters of Arts in Education degree from what was known as the Michigan State Normal College (currently Eastern Michigan University); receiving his diploma in June of 1954 as the first black graduate of the Masters of Arts program (Carroll & Mather, 1997). Foster then expeditiously completed his first round of education by attending Seattle Pacific College in Washington for Christian missionary studies, graduating in 1956 (Hairston & Smith, 1983).

With many qualifications to his name, Foster sought out support for proposed missionary work in establishing schools for the deaf in Africa. He petitioned many organizations in the United States, but was met with resounding un-interest from many established missionary groups (Holgate, 2010). Perhaps it was his deafness that was an impediment to his progress in gaining initial support; most likely it also had to do with the obvious fact that he was a black man in a very segregated society at all levels, religion included. Instead of throwing his hands up in the face of so many challenges, Foster created his own organization: Christian Mission for Deaf Africans (later changed to Christian Mission for the Deaf). The goal of the organization was to bring Christian education to deaf Africans, providing them with language and general education in the process. Foster petitioned his community and church in Detroit for support; he also received encouragement from Gallaudet's then President, Leonard M. Elstad (Moore & Panara, 1996).

Foster worked in advance of his first voyage to Africa, gathering monetary contributions in the United States and also laying initial groundwork in Africa. He wrote a letter to an African publication asking for Christian people's assistance in starting his mission work (Diouf, 2007). It is not known at this time if he made contacts as a result of this petition abroad, but one may

assume that African Christians strong in faith and living among people in need would have responded positively, unlike the cold response he received from established organizations in the United States during the 1950s. The additional challenge of racism against blacks did not exist in Africa like in America.

After much anticipation and preparation, in 1957 Foster flew to Africa to follow his dream. After exploring possibilities to establish a school in Liberia, Foster then landed himself in Ghana. Newly independent (the first African nation to win independence from colonial reign: March 6, 1957), change was fresh in the air in Ghana. Foster went to work with a reluctant Ghanaian government, who falsely believed that there were not enough deaf children to warrant a school. In the capital city Accra, Foster rented a classroom in a private school building and established the Accra Mission School for the Deaf with 53 pupils of various ages in 1957. This rudimentary beginning was a large accomplishment in itself; prior to Foster, no school or program or teachers of the deaf existed in Ghana. He was literally starting from scratch, and he found himself doing much of the teaching, ministering, and networking on his own. Foster's perseverance paid off however; in two short years, the school in Accra had moved to accept both boarding and day students, and had a waiting list of over 100 children anxious to begin their education (Moore & Panara, 1996).

In addition to his focus on the school in Accra, Foster worked during these early years to establish a residential school for the deaf in Mampong-Akuapim, just 23 miles north of Accra. Both of Foster's schools were quickly taken over by the government supported by national funds thereafter (Van Cleve, 1987). More currently, as of the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Celebrations for Deaf Education in Ghana in 2007, 12 residential schools and 1 day school for the deaf were educating Ghana's deaf student population, with original gratitude bestowed upon Andrew Foster.

On a related note, your author Alison Stow taught visual arts from 2007-2009 at one of those residential schools: Bechem School for the Deaf in the Brong Ahafo Region of Ghana. The school currently serves approximately 360 deaf students from kindergarten through technical levels (age equivalent to that of high school students). Alison had the good fortune to visit Mampong-Akuapim School for the Deaf, mentioned above, as well as five of the remaining eleven schools for the deaf in the country. She also facilitated partial scholarships so that two of her best junior high students could attend Ghana's only secondary school for the deaf in Mampong-Akuapim. Although all schools for the deaf are government sponsored programs (and yet they all rely heavily on international aid: gifts-in-kind and/or infrastructure projects), students at the secondary level must purchase their own books and uniforms, and provide costly travel expenses. This is often more than a Ghanaian family can provide. The students at Mampong-Akuapim are currently in their third year of a five year program, and have hopes of pursuing higher education (although this is nearly impossible in Ghana; at this time, the government provides no support for higher education of deaf people).

Among many Ghanaian students currently attending schools for the deaf in Ghana, Andrew Foster holds a special place in their hearts. They recognize that it was because of this legendary black deaf American man that they have such opportunities for education today. Also interesting is the strong link in Ghanaian sign language to American Sign Language. Although many of the Ghanaian signs currently used are regionalized and/or outdated by American standards, there remains a solid connection to ASL in general. This language history and language ability is a direct result of Foster's missionary work abroad more than 50 years ago.

Foster took one of many trips home to the United States to fundraise in 1959, but he detoured through Germany to attend a meeting of the World Federation of the Deaf. It was at this

conference where he met a young deaf German woman named Berta Zuther; she was also interested in missionary work. After two years of courtship, Andrew and Berta married in 1961 in Nigeria. They proceeded to have a family of five children while continuing their missionary work abroad (Carroll & Mather, 1997).

Foster's initial successes in Ghana encouraged him to move to the next country. During the early 1960s, schools in the cities of Ibadan, Kaduna, and Enugu were established in Nigeria. Throughout these years, Foster continually returned to the United States in order to fundraise and continue his own studies. He participated in post-graduate work in teacher training at Wayne State University in Detroit, and evangelical studies at Detroit Bible College. He found it necessary to improve his overall skills to make him more efficient and effective in his missionary work in Africa, which included establishing schools for the deaf in Ivory Coast, Togo, Benin, Senegal, Niger, Sierra Leone, Upper Volta, Chad, Congo, Central African Republic, Gabon, Kenya, and Zaire, among others (Lang & Meath-Lang, 1995).

Within Foster's organization, Christian Mission for Deaf Africans, the main objective was to promote the spiritual and educational well-being of deaf people in Africa. The organization aimed to establish boarding, primary, and vocational schools in which to educate deaf children using sign language. Sign language was inaccessible to many isolated deaf children in Africa, as it was common for parents to hide their deaf children out of shame and/or force them into a life of labor on the farms. But with a strong language base, deaf children could learn above and beyond the basics communicated by rudimentary home signs (e.g. *eat, sleep, toilet*). And ultimately, an important element in the eyes of Foster, the Gospel of Jesus Christ would be incorporated into the school curriculum and made accessible to children (Hairston & Smith, 1983).

A quote from Foster's writing titled *Twelve Scriptural Reasons Why You Should Be Concerned About the Lost Deaf* speaks volumes: "Because God plainly expects some deaf souls among the Great Harvest, 'And in that day shall the deaf hear the Words of the Book...' (Isaiah 29:18) '... and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped,' (Isaiah 35:5)," (Foster, n.d.). This illuminates Foster's belief that deaf people are equal to hearing people, most especially in the eyes of God, and perhaps helps better explain Foster's inspiration and endless motivation for missionary work among deaf people in Africa.

Foster's organization, once having established a school for the deaf, would often hand control to local governments and/or organizations. He did not seek to build and manage a Christian empire in Africa, but rather allow both spiritual and educational development to support deaf people's lives. Foster knew he could not do all of the work by himself, so he trained host country nationals and gave them full responsibility for the work at hand. Christian Mission for Deaf Africans emphasis was four-fold: (1) teaching, (2) training teachers, (3) educating the public, and (4) advising governments (Diouf, 2007). Foster cleverly knew that by involving local people, the projects he established would continue without him, progressing in a way unique to the local populations' various needs (Holgate, 2010).

Foster illustrated some of the challenges that Christian Mission for Deaf Africans faced in educating deaf African children in a speech given at the Seventh World Congress of the Deaf in Washington, D.C., July 31<sup>st</sup>, 1975. Foster lists inadequate schools (estimated that 1 in every 1000 people in Africa are deaf), lack-of trained personnel, finances (developing countries face many strains on small budgets), communication (many African languages are tonal, thereby making lip reading even more complex an endeavor than in the United States), and additional challenges related to spiritual and moral training in societies easily corrupted by deviance

(Foster, 1975). In spite of the odds stacked against him, Foster and his organization continued to make strides in the face of many challenging obstacles experienced throughout the continent.

The majority of Foster's schools were affiliated with Christian churches, as was natural for a Christian missionary trying to spread the Bible's word (Carroll & Mather, 1997). As was later recorded by Foster, he ran into obstacles in trying to make in-roads in countries with dominant Muslim populations, such as Mali (Diouf, 2007). Therefore, it remains that current progress in Deaf Education among African countries has huge discrepancies due to Christian and/or Muslim affiliation. From the author's experience, having worked in both Ghana and Mali in the field of Deaf Education, Ghana's deaf educational system is well ahead of Mali. Mali's program started belatedly in the early-mid 90s, and as of today, there are only a few day schools for the deaf in various regional capitals (and many of those operate within a single classroom, borrowed from hearing schools; reminiscent of Foster's early years in Ghana more than 50 years ago).

In 1970, Foster received an honorary Doctor of Humane Letters degree from Gallaudet College. The degree was given to honor him as a role model for Africans in the field of Deaf Education, both deaf and hearing, who studied at Gallaudet and later returned to their homeland to improve the education for deaf people on the continent. A few years later in 1975, Gallaudet College Alumni Association gave Foster their annual award for promoting the betterment of deaf people around the world (Moore & Panara, 1996).

In the late 1970s and much of the 1980s, Foster balanced his work in Africa with fundraising tours throughout much of North America and Western Europe. He spent much time petitioning benefactors and relaying messages about his organization's accomplishments. Foster writes in *Roots Out of a Dry Ground*: " 'What are some results of your ministry?' ... we have

been privileged to see hundreds of deaf children learn to read, write and communicate- especially to see them read their Bibles and Gospel literature independently,” (Foster, n.d.). He also set aside months during the year to be with family, especially after it was discovered that Berta had cancer in 1975 and the family subsequently relocated to the United States. She was treated and not expected to live very long, however Berta beat the odds and led a long and productive life beyond her illness (Diouf, 2007).

Tragically, Andrew Foster’s life ended prematurely when on December 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1987, he accepted an open seat on a small chartered plane headed to Kenya. The plane struggled to gain altitude, and crashed shortly after take-off in the mountains of Rwanda. There were no survivors from the accident, and on that day, the deaf world lost a great leader (Lang & Meath-Lang, 1995).

Foster’s missionary work in Africa was prolific. Over a 30 year time span in which he spent working in Africa, Christian Mission for Deaf Africans established schools at a rate of approximately one per year (Holgate, 2010). Many governments with which Foster collaborated were encouraged to undertake rehabilitation programs for people with other types of disabilities, as well as deafness (Moore & Panara, 1996). Presently, hundreds of thousands of deaf adults and children have benefited (or are currently benefiting) from an education that would not exist in the same way, if at all, if not for Andrew Foster (Holgate, 2010).

A memorial service for Foster was held at Gallaudet University in Chapel Hall on January 26<sup>th</sup> in 1988. Many people paid their respects to Reverend and Dr. Andrew Foster on that day, including former students from various schools for the deaf in Africa, then attending Gallaudet for themselves. Former student Gabriel Adepoju summed up Foster’s life in a historical context as it relates to progress made in deaf education over the past 200 years:

“Andrew Foster is to Africa what Thomas Hopkins Gallaudet is to the United States of America,” (Moore & Panara, 1996).

Nigerian author Kenneth Diouf writes that countless deaf individuals in all corners of Africa “would not have been where they are today without the unusually committed life of this missionary,” (Diouf, 2007). Andrew Foster was an advocate and father for an entire continent of deaf people, and the world is a brighter place because of his countless contributions to the education of deaf Africans.

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