



**Andrew Jackson Foster: The Man, the Vision, and the Thirty-Year Uphill Climb**  
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*While much has been written about Andrew Foster's life and accomplishments, the focus too often has been on the religious dimension. However, a comprehensive catalog of his activities and accomplishments and analysis of his enduring legacy clearly suggest that this focus is too narrow. He correctly figured that a vision focused narrowly on religious conversion would achieve limited and fleeting success. This paper examines the antecedents of Andrew Foster's vision for the underserved deaf populations in Africa, analyzes the intrinsic and extrinsic motivations that propelled him in a sustained 30-year "uphill climb" –as he described it- and examines his enduring legacy as a missionary, educator, mentor, and advocate.*

#### INTRODUCTION

Andrew Jackson Foster is widely recognized for his outstanding achievements as a missionary and educator serving deaf populations in Africa over the span of 30 years. His legacy as a pioneering missionary and educator in Africa has been compared to the legacy of Laurent Clerc as a pioneering educator in the United States (Ilabor, 2009).

Andrew Foster was born on June 27, 1925 in Ensley, a suburb of Birmingham, Alabama. Shortly after his 11th birthday, he and his younger brother, Edward, became deaf as a result of spinal meningitis. He resumed his education at the Alabama School for the Colored Deaf in Talladega, which did not include a high school. With such limited opportunities available locally, he set out on his own at the age of 17 for Detroit, Michigan, joining millions of other African Americans who migrated from the rural Southern United States to the North in the Second Great Migration (1941 – 1970).

In Detroit, he worked at a variety of jobs, including jobs at military equipment factories during World War II, while studying for his high school diploma on the side. He subsequently earned a diploma from the Detroit Institute of Commerce. In 1951, he received a full four-year congressional scholarship to Gallaudet College, where he earned a B.A. degree in education in three years, becoming the first African American to graduate from Gallaudet. He went on to earn an M.A. in deaf education from the Michigan State Normal College (now Eastern Michigan University) in 1955 and a B.A. in Christian Missions from Seattle Pacific College in 1956. Remarkably, he was able to earn all three degrees within a period of five years.

From an early age, Andrew Foster enjoyed attending Sunday School and his spiritual development accelerated soon after he became deaf, eventually empowering him to take on the challenge of becoming a missionary and educator to the underserved deaf populations in Africa.

In Detroit, he met Walter J. Lyon, a hearing pastor who became his spiritual mentor and actively encouraged him to become a missionary.

By 1955 he had made a firm commitment to become a missionary to the deaf populations in Africa, especially those living in the middle sections of the continent, which his research showed had no schools for the deaf. From 1956, when he founded the Christian Mission to Deaf Africans (CMDA), to his untimely death in a plane crash in 1987, he established 32 mission schools for the deaf in 13 countries in Africa and trained scores of deaf Africans to carry on the work of educating and ministering to the deaf in their own communities and beyond.

Andrew Foster was generally recognized as a missionary first and an educator second, even though his activities and accomplishments in both areas were inseparably intertwined. Not as widely known were his significant accomplishments as a skillful mentor to dozens of deaf and hearing Africans and as an outspoken advocate for full citizenship for deaf people in every country he visited. However, both of these less studied aspects of his life work are key reasons for his enduring legacy. Many of the people he mentored have emulated his strategies to propagate his work in their own countries and beyond. Even less studied is what motivated and empowered him to take on the challenge of becoming a missionary and educator to the underserved deaf populations in Africa and to stay the course over a period of 30 years. This paper examines the antecedents of Andrew Foster's vision for the underserved deaf populations in Africa, analyzes the intrinsic and extrinsic motivation that propelled him in a sustained 30-year effort to establish as many mission schools as possible, and examines his enduring legacy as a missionary, educator, mentor, and advocate.

## METHODOLOGY

The qualitative analysis approach was used to examine what motivated Andrew Foster to become a missionary to deaf Africans at a time when such endeavor required exceptional human qualities and what sustained that motivation over a period of 30 years despite constant and myriad challenges in the field. The primary sources of information include: the CMDA quarterly newsletter, which Andrew Foster edited; his reports, articles, and presentations; the author's personal knowledge of Andrew Foster through working at the CMDA field headquarters in Nigeria; reminiscences provided by other close associates of Andrew Foster; and the public records of his lifetime achievements and their ripple effects.

## THE VISION TO SERVE

In an undated article (Foster, n.d), Andrew Foster offered insights into what motivated him to choose a life of service as a missionary and educator in Africa. He reflected that a vague longing in his boyhood to go to Africa may have been inspired by God and that his deafness only temporarily distracted that desire. In the same article, he stated that his experiences at a missionary convention in 1954 finally convinced him that God indeed wanted him to become and educator and missionary to the deaf in Africa.

Given such affirmations in his own words, it would appear that the answer to the question of what motivated him to choose a life of service is quite straightforward: a divine call to serve that he could not refuse. However, a closer look at his life before he made the final decision to serve,

a comprehensive catalog of his activities and accomplishments in 30 years of continuous service, and analysis of his enduring legacy clearly suggest that his motivation could not have been so one-dimensional. Further, such answer would suggest that his motivation to serve was primarily or even entirely extrinsic; a straightforward desire to fulfill a divine call to serve. Motivation is usually multidimensional (Ryan & Edward 2000), therefore it is worth investigating other possible elements of Andrew Foster's motivation to serve and to maintain such high level of commitment to his service goals for over 30 years.

The reported interest in his boyhood –and prior to his religious awakening- to go to Africa suggests an early curiosity about his ancestral roots. The young Andrew Foster, given his demonstrated intellectual abilities and ambition to achieve greater things than what his immediate environment would allow, probably had more than a passing interest in the origins of his people and why an official and rigidly enforced policy of separate but equal should exist. There is indication that he acted upon this curiosity (Foster, n.d) and that his growing knowledge about conditions on the African continent led to the development of a certain level of ethnocultural empathy (Wang, Davidson, Yakushko, Savoy, Tan & Bleier, 2003), especially after the onset of deafness. Ethnocultural empathy has been identified as an intrinsic motivator of people who choose to become missionaries. (Moessner, 1992).

Perhaps the most compelling evidence that his motivation was not primarily extrinsic is his 30 continuous years of service to the deaf in Africa under very challenging conditions. It is generally believed by his close associates that if his life had not been cut short by the plane crash, he most certainly would have continued founding and supporting mission schools until age and failing health force him to slow down or retire from active service. Research on human motivation strongly suggests that such sustained commitment to a difficult task depends primarily on intrinsic motivation (Ryan & Edward, 2000), (Unger & Thunuluri,1997).

#### THE 30-YEAR JOURNEY: ENDLESS HILLS

In characterizing his 30-year journey in Africa as an “uphill climb all the way”, Andrew Foster (Foster, 1987) synthesized his struggles as a pioneering educator and missionary to the deaf on a continent where many countries were still struggling with enormous economic, political, and social challenges. As frequently reported in the CMDA quarterly newsletter and in a keynote address at the 7<sup>th</sup> World Congress of the Deaf (Foster, 1976), his challenges in the field were many, various, and unrelenting. Recurring challenges mentioned include:

- Chronic shortage of funds to support the mission.
- Inadequate infrastructure in most countries, making travel difficult and sometimes dangerous.
- Skepticism by local officials that a significant number of deaf children existed in their communities.
- Low expectation of deaf children virtually everywhere.
- Difficulty of explaining abstract Bible concepts in a language most of the deaf participants would understand.

- Difficulty of finding, training, and retaining knowledgeable and reliable associates in each country.
- Long separation from family.
- Language barriers in French-speaking countries

To have endured these challenges constantly over a period of 30 years is a testament to Andrew Foster's Christian faith, resourcefulness, courage, and perseverance. It was indeed an uphill climb all the way because the challenges never diminished or became easier as he kept seeking new opportunities to open mission schools in new countries where he literally had to start over to build a local organization, locate and train indigenous workers, convince local education officials that there indeed are many deaf children in their communities and that they have a moral obligation to provide them with opportunities to attain full citizenship.

### ACHIEVEMENTS AND LEGACY

Andrew Foster astutely figured early that a vision focused narrowly on religious conversion would achieve only limited and fleeting success. In extending his activities beyond religious conversion and education to training and mentoring future leaders in each country as well as engaging in advocacy for full citizenship at every opportunity, he demonstrated an affinity with deaf Africans that went beyond the normal boundaries of missionary activity. His periodic reports in the mission newsletter and the public records of his achievements clearly show that he was at once a pioneering missionary, educator, mentor, and advocate for the deaf throughout his 30 years of service to the deaf in Africa. These four dimensions of his lifework are virtually inseparable but more is known about first two than the last two.

#### Pioneering Missionary

It is undisputed that the central focus of Andrew Foster's work in Africa was ministering to the spiritual needs of deaf Africans, with a goal for each ministry created to eventually become self-governing and self-propagating. However, since educational opportunities for the deaf were severely limited or nonexistent in most locations prior to his arrival, he often had to start virtually from scratch to introduce reading, writing, and American Sign Language before he could minister to their spiritual needs in meaningful ways. He wrote in an early newsletter (Foster, 1961) that the Christian faith is highly abstract and that it would take time for the concepts to become really meaningful to the young students and illiterate adults. He also recognized that understanding of the religious concepts might not lead to true conversion due to individual choice. In the same newsletter, he estimated that it might take a generation to build a critical mass of converts who would sustain the ministry in their own communities. As such, he pursued a strategy of selecting, training, and supporting local deaf leaders to manage and carry on the mission work in their own communities as he moved on to other areas of need. The long-term success of this strategy varied by country and by location within countries. The greatest success in this area appears to be in Nigeria, where there exists a network of churches by and for the deaf under the umbrella of the Christian Mission for the Deaf Church, a church organization established and governed by deaf Nigerians.

#### Educator

<http://dsdj.gallaudet.edu>

Even though the central focus of Andrew Foster's lifework was preaching the Gospel to deaf Africans, his accomplishments and legacy appears to be the greatest in the area of deaf education. It would be incorrect to suggest that Andrew Foster's activities in the area of education were incidental or intentionally secondary to a greater goal of religious conversion and spiritual ministry. To the contrary, the evidence is overwhelming that he had a genuine commitment to the educational and social advancement of deaf Africans and that he was quite successful in that regard. The main difference was that he assumed full responsibility for his spiritual ministry while encouraging governments, agencies, and local deaf leaders to assume primary responsibility for educational and other secular needs.

In the span of 30 years, he established 32 mission schools in 13 countries. However being acutely aware of the sheer enormity of the problem of illiteracy, he convened the first African Conference on Education of the Deaf, which brought together educators and government officials from across the African continent to address the problem of mass illiteracy among the deaf on the continent. At the conference, which was held at the University of Ibadan in 1965, he urged the delegates to form "a council for the education and welfare of the deaf in Africa to urge governments, mission churches, societies, and other agencies to open schools and classes for the deaf in the shortest possible time" (Foster, 1966). Thus the Council on the Education and Welfare of the Deaf in Africa was established and Andrew Foster was elected its first president.

Among other education-centered activities, the CMDA newsletter regularly featured a "Parents Page" which typically contained culled news features and articles about deafness and deaf education. More importantly, he trained a number of teachers and school administrators and helped finance the college education of a number of deaf youths who themselves became educators, leaders, and mentors.

His general strategy in the area of education was to establish a mission school that usually did not go beyond the elementary level, because he strongly believed that governments and the community have a moral obligation to assume responsibility for the secular education of their own deaf citizens and to provide opportunities for them to attain full citizenship. Therefore, he actively encouraged the local educational authorities to assume responsibility for the continuation and expansion of the mission schools he had founded. He was also a staunch advocate of visual language and visual learning as the best approach to educating deaf children.

#### Mentor

Andrew Foster's initiatives and accomplishments as a mentor are not as well known. They were nevertheless quite extensive and were critical to the continuation of his lifework, as former mentors became leaders in their own communities and beyond. The first deaf Africans to earn a degree from Gallaudet College were all initially recruited and trained to work in the mission. He actively encouraged them to advance their education and helped to raise funds to cover their tuition and living expenses. His mentoring activities crossed borders. He frequently organized leadership training workshops, at the expense of the mission, for participants from various African countries.

Andrew Foster demonstrated a unique ability to make people believe in themselves and to feel empowered to take on increasingly challenging responsibilities. He had two primary objectives as a mentor: to identify and train local leaders to whom he could entrust the management of the mission church and school when he moved on to establish new ones and to help promising young people to advance their education, secure gainful employment or own a business, and in turn become leaders and mentors in their own communities. Regardless of the primary objective of the mentoring relationship, he expressed much pride in the achievements of his mentees, frequently holding them up as models for what is possible when deaf people have opportunities to advance their education and to earn a living with that education. In addition, his stature as a role model in and of itself served as powerful inspiration for myriads of deaf young children and young adults who were not specifically mentored.

He strongly believed in and worked very hard to advance the self-empowerment of deaf Africans. His efforts as a mentor were hugely successful and produced a large number of educated and gainfully employed deaf Africans, especially in those countries having the means to provide such opportunities. Notable examples of countries having the means to provide such opportunities include Ghana, Ivory Coast, Nigeria, and the Republic of Benin. The Democratic Republic of the Congo should have ranked high on that list due to the relatively larger number of mission schools founded there, but endemic official corruption as well as recurrent civil unrest stifled those opportunities.

#### Advocate

In every African country where he established a mission school, Andrew Foster advocated vigorously, using educational films, lectures, literature, news bulletins, newsletters, and personal visits, for inclusion of deaf people in society and to be provided paths to full citizenship through adequate educational opportunities, employment opportunities and social acceptance (Foster, 1962). His advocacy initiatives were robust and multifaceted, covering education, employment, and social welfare. He was usually the sole advocate for the deaf in the beginning, but he would quickly seek out allies in the local community to help make the case for real change in educational and social policy to benefit the deaf. Even more successfully, he recruited, trained, and supported deaf Africans to become effective advocates themselves and to establish associations to advance their own interests.

His extensive activities in the area of advocacy provide ample evidence that, in addition to his spiritual mission, he was just as committed to more secular objectives that would ultimately help deaf Africans achieve full citizenship in their own communities. In addition to organizing the first African conference on education, he constantly lobbied national and local governments to address the lack of educational opportunities for the deaf, organized and hosted the inaugural meeting of the Nigerian Association for the Advancement of the Deaf in 1972, and represented deaf Africans at international gatherings such as the World Congress of the Deaf.

#### Conclusion

Andrew Foster, with his demonstrated intellectual abilities, capacity for hard work, entrepreneur spirit, and ability to focus on goals in the face of unremitting challenges, could have lived a productive, rewarding, and relatively quiet life pursuing a career or building a successful

business in his home country. Instead, he chose a challenging life of service to the underprivileged deaf populations in Africa. He was more than a missionary educator; he was also a skillful mentor and an outspoken advocate for the deaf everywhere he went.

These additional activities contributed very significantly to his enduring legacy, which was built upon by the first generation of indigenous deaf leaders trained and mentored by him and is being propagated by second and third generation indigenous leaders. His greatest gift to deaf Africans probably was to dispel the notion, everywhere he went, that deaf people cannot be educated, become gainfully employed, and attain full citizenship. If all he achieved in 30 years of service to the deaf in Africa was to found 32 mission schools in 13 countries, it was still a remarkable achievement that probably has never been equaled by any other missionary and educator.

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