

Andrew Foster and deaf education

BY YAKUBU KARAGAMA AND KATHERINE CONROY

This article examines the career of deaf African American, Andrew Foster, and his contribution to deaf education in Sub-Saharan Africa.

The history of medicine has often been guilty of attributing great revolutions to a single person (usually a white man) revering them as a hero whilst minimising contributions from predecessors, collaborators and the general context and culture allowing these progressions to be made. However, the story of Andrew Foster, a poor, disabled black boy in the segregated American South, who grew up to transform deaf education across much of Africa, is little known, despite its echoes of a Hollywood epic. Therefore, we felt it fitting to acknowledge both his achievements, and the obstacles he overcame, in this Historical Figures edition.



Andrew Foster.

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Early life

Andrew Foster was born in Birmingham, Alabama in 1925, the son of an African American coal miner. He attended Alabama School for the Negro Deaf after losing his hearing to meningitis aged 11. At 17, with scarce opportunity for employment at home, he moved to Detroit and took on a variety of low-skilled jobs. He was refused admission to the Michigan School for the Deaf – ostensibly due to his parents living outside the catchment area, although several scholars reviewing his life suspect it was due to his colour; despite the state's civil rights laws being relatively progressive, prejudice and racism was rife. However, Foster persevered, attending night classes and partaking in correspondence courses to gain both a diploma in accountancy and business administration from the Detroit Institute to Commerce and a high school diploma by 1951. Eager to take his education further, Foster succeeded in securing a scholarship to Gallaudet University (a higher education institution specifically for those with hearing impairment) on his third attempt and became its first African American student. After graduating with a degree in Education, he went on to achieve master's degrees as the first deaf, black student at both Michigan State Normal College and Seattle Pacific Christian College.

Why Africa?

It is unclear exactly why Foster turned his attentions to Africa; despite discouragement from his contemporaries and a lack of resources, he founded the Christian Mission for Deaf Africans in 1956. Some sources imply his strong Christian faith drew him to missionary-style work. Others tell of his childhood desire to travel to Africa and his belief in Pan-Africanism: restoring the continent to its historical and cultural status by reversing the damage wrought by colonialism. However, a large factor in Foster's drive seems to have been the realisation that, despite the barriers he had faced as a deaf, black man in the US, the



Foster family photo while they were living in Nigeria on a mission for the Christian Mission for Deaf Africans. Front row L-R: Jackie, Freddy, and Tim. Back row L-R: Berta, Faith, and Andrew.

discrimination and dearth of opportunity faced by deaf Africans was still greater. The 19th century had seen western missionaries establish some centres for deaf education in Sub-Saharan Africa. However, their small number, coupled with their city locations, meant that the scattered rural population struggled to access them. Furthermore, the missionaries modelled their teaching on methods used in their home countries. Most pushed their students away from signing towards oral communication, not appreciating the importance of tone to many African languages compared to European ones, impeding many of their learners. Few grasped the cultural significance of the multiple, diverse languages spoken throughout any one African country (a consequence of years of colonial division and administration); if a child was being taught a different language at school to that spoken at home, this only served to isolate them more from their families.

Foster's schools

Foster's impressive stature and charisma saw him raise much-needed funds on a speaking tour of the United States. Ugandan independence in 1957, coupled with its stability and widespread use of spoken English, was his first destination.

“He founded 32 schools across 13 countries in Sub-Saharan Africa, as well as an annual summer school for deaf educators from French-speaking African countries”

FURTHER READING

1. Andrew Foster – Visionary Leader. Gallaudet University. www.gallaudet.edu/about/history-and-traditions/andrew-foster Last accessed January 2021.
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3. Carroll C, Mather SM. *Movers and Shakers: Deaf People Who Changed the World*. Dawn Sign Press; 1997:45-50.
4. Kiyaga NB, Moores DF. Deafness in Sub-Saharan Africa. *American Annals of the Deaf* 2003;**148**(1):18-24.
5. Runnels J. Dr Andrew Foster: A literature review. *American Annals of the Deaf* 2017;**162**(3):243-52.



Foster with the first set of students at the Ibadan Mission School for the Deaf, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1960.



Foster behind a church podium in the 1980s.

Images Courtesy of the Gallaudet University Archives

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