

31/12/2011

Remembering Doreen;

Somewhere in the Good Book it is written that the children of the childless will be plentiful, and in a way that is how we celebrate Doreen, both in person and in spirit, together with many in the UK and around the world. Only God knows and sees all those who shared or were affected by Doreen's life and vision.

I believe that God Almighty has a plan for us. Doreen's experience of religious and



church life was rather complicated and far from easy, but her faith would always project that same confidence. Quite obviously the plan was for her to be a teacher, and it is almost as though in 1925, when blessing the Woodford family with a child, the Almighty thought: "Let us have ourselves a teacher of the Deaf". She was passionate about her vocation and chosen profession. Indeed, she considered it a privilege to be a "Teacher of the Deaf".

Doreen's mother hearing, her father deaf and from a long line of deaf people, she was born hearing but grew up Deaf. She was determined and headstrong, forthright and perhaps a bit direct for some, fluent signer and finger spelling communicator, lover of anything to do with deafness, walker and bird-watcher, a perfectionist. Having learned about poverty as a child she was generous with her money, time and energy. She was a person of wisdom, hope and high expectations.

Starting her teaching career in Margate she went to a number of schools both to learn and to teach, ending up as Head of a school for multiple-handicapped children in the UK. As part of their education she took her students and protégées on trips all over the British Isles (much later I was to follow in their footsteps) as well as to "the continent" and Switzerland, where I got to know her. Even a growing variety of physical ailments could not stop her.

She helped organise the teachers of the Deaf in the UK and was the first Chair of BATOD, "The British Association of Teachers Of the Deaf". Meanwhile she had become well-known at conferences and congresses as a presenter and lecturer. After a long and distinguished career as educator, headmistress, carer, organizer, girl-guide, pastor and lay-preacher, counselor, mentor and friend of deaf people young and old, she retired from her paid job as teacher at the mandatory age of 60 years. Clearing out, and to commemorate the event(?), Doreen dispatched an enormous refrigerator-size box to Jordan with redundant books, toys, puzzles, and educational materials, as "they needed it more".



Already having traveled to countries in Africa, the Indian continent and elsewhere, rather than slowing down Doreen had happily anticipated the chance to start a 2nd career. She longed to be a teacher and teacher trainer, organizer and fundraiser, professional traveler and advocate for all causes 'Deaf' in developing countries.

Living a frugal existence in her little cottage behind the

Methodist Church in the Olympic town of Much Wenlock, her money went to raising more money. This she spent on projects in out of the way places such as India and Pakistan, Malta and Cyprus, Kenya and Ethiopia, Tanzania and Uganda, Malawi and Congo, Afghanistan, Djibouti and Somaliland, Jordan and Egypt, South Africa, Thailand and elsewhere, where she made hundreds and thousands of friends. Doing this she was wont to quietly go her way. Indeed, in her last days a friend would tell how hardly anybody in her village knew what she had been up to on all these trips abroad. Basically that was between herself, God and the people she cared for. Eventually she was recognized for her outstanding work with an OBE.

In 1985 she helped initiate the organization "Initiatives for Deaf Education in Developing Countries". With members from the UK and some 20 African and Asian countries it gave 15 years of original and unique services to many people. Workshops and conferences were held in a number of countries until its functions were taken over by others.

In its stead came the more modest "Deaf Africa Fund", supporting projects and Deaf young people in Central and East Africa. She continued to provide training and advice, material and financial support where she could and always tried to make personally sure that they were effective and somehow got to the right place. In the year 2000 Doreen established the charitable society "Allah Kariem (God Provides)" or – as it became known – "Friends of the Holy Land Institute for the Deaf", in aid of work with the Deaf and Deafblind in Jordan and the Middle East region. To honour her and her endeavours, the Woodford Foundation was established, which institutionalized her desire to be of service to Deaf people in developing countries.

One of my favorite anecdotes is about us going to Congo to visit schools for the Deaf and conduct a training course. Kisangani is on the great Congo river by the Stanley Falls and so very humid that wet clothing and laundry basically never dry. Flying there in a little four-seater plane we had to weigh our luggage as well as

ourselves. With extra fuel for the return trip we were too heavy and Doreen with her two pieces of luggage - one with clothing and personal items and one with copybooks, pencils, etc. for the school and the children – was asked to leave one bag behind. She immediately decided that she just could not go on without the presents for the children. Thus without extra clothing for over a week she had to do with what she wore, humid and unpleasant as it was. (To my shame it never even occurred to me that I could have left my own bag behind instead). Finally, at 80 years of age, she decided that she had to stop traveling, but until 2010 there was always "one more, last trip". During all those years she also mentored and coached countless Deaf and hearing teachers from developing countries who visited or studied in the UK.

As an old-fashioned but experienced letter-writer, it took a bit of convincing for Doreen to see that computers could actually be very useful. However, once she got the hang of it she became quite an accomplished 'googler' as well. Extremely well-read, she enjoyed informed discussions about the Education of the Deaf and just about any topic. She was also a great summariser of what was happening in the worlds of church and faith and much appreciated as a Methodist local preacher. In between making history with Deaf people in developing countries, Doreen enjoyed writing about the history of the Deaf. She became one of the founding members of the British Deaf History Society and wrote a number of books. Perhaps there is someone who will write a book about her, one day?



In August 2011 she had a very unfortunate fall. Whatever the cause, she may have sustained greater injury than her body could handle. Initially happy in the retirement home, she found it rather hard in the longer term. Losing her independence was not in the plan and instead she made up her mind that life need not be prolonged but that she would rather go and meet her Maker "with her boots on". However, she still had some way to go. After heart failure and pneumonia, her mental and physical capacities started to shut down. But even at the very end, in her weakened state and when communication was failing - when I told her that I had to go - her body language still seemed to indicate that she would rather get out of bed, come along and "get on with it".

Fiercely independent, determined, (you wouldn't normally try cross her - and she hated tea!), bright and big hearted, self-effacing, simple and content with little, faithful, generous to a fault with herself, her possessions and her affections, she was always interested in the well-being of others. We thank God for her energy and insatiable lust to "do things" for Deaf and Deafblind people and their families, and her ability to find them everywhere.



Being small of stature she was one of these giants who claimed little but did so much more, leaving the bragging to others. She would be the first to admit that she was far from perfect, but in her own inimitable way she served her heavenly Master and left the world a little bit better than she had found it. We'll miss her, but in our grief we are grateful that she could go "home".

Doreen, "Well done, good and faithful servant!"
Thank you! Good bye, God by you!
Yours, as ever, Brother Andrew
- together with all your friends.
January 2012