

INTERVIEW WITH HERTA VON STIEGEL RESPONDING TO SOCIAL NEEDS USING AN INVESTMENT APPROACH

Herta von Stiegel is the founder and CEO of Ariya Capital Group Limited, a fund manager located in London, Gaborone (Botswana) and the Channel Islands that invests in organizations that provide clean energy, financial institutions and telecommunications for the people of Africa. She has worked in senior positions at Citibank, J.P. Morgan and AIG Financial Products. She is the founder of the Prince's Trust Women's Leadership Group and a board member of the Committee of 200. She is the co-producer of the award-winning film, "The Mountain Within," based on von Stiegel's book, *The Mountain Within: Leadership Lessons and Inspiration for Your Climb to the Top* (2011). von Stiegel earned her undergraduate degree in history and German with honors at Andrews University, a Juris Doctor from Thomas M. Cooley Law School in Lansing, Michigan, and a Master's of Law in taxation from the New York University School of Law. In the summer of 2012, von Stiegel received an honorary degree from Andrews University. Shirley Freed is managing editor for the *Journal of Applied Christian Leadership* and coordinator for the doctoral leadership program at Andrews University.

SHIRLEY FREED SF : Let's start with your own personal journey—the path that led you to this awareness and desire to do something about social issues. There are two social issues that I know for sure you're concerned with. First, what you describe in your book, climbing a mountain with emotionally and physically challenged climbers. That was unique; where did that come from? And then, of course, there's your work in Africa. Tell us the personal journey to get to that.

HERTA VON STIEGEL HVS : It's been a constant development because I grew up behind the Iron Curtain, at the height of communism; I'm a child of the Cold War. I was very conscious of the injustices in the world, the difficulties that people are facing, and often through no fault of their own. For example, in my parents' case, when the Communists took over, they basically expropriated all their properties. My grandparents were left with one house. I literally grew up with my parents talking about, "We owned this and we owned that," but it was all gone. And so the fact that stuff

happens, and people are subjected to untold hardship, often through no fault of their own, was something that I very much grew up with. Even as a young child, I felt that the world may not be fair, life may not be fair, but as children of God we are called to do something about it. So from a very early age I remember tutoring children who needed help in school. And there was always this sense of, you can help, you can make a difference.

When my parents and I arrived in the States I was a teenager—I was in twelfth grade. To me the sky was the limit. I wanted to be a lawyer from the time I was two feet tall. Having a solid legal training and then becoming a banker opened doors and resulted in a successful career, first of all in the States, then in London. But through it all I was very conscious of the fact that the line between the “right side of the tracks” and the so-called “wrong side of the tracks” is very, very thin. And you cannot be complacent and self-satisfied with being on the “right side of the tracks.”

enlightened self-interest, let alone because we want to make a difference for the Kingdom.

So that was kind of my journey. In 2005 and 2006 I went all over Africa. I looked at demographics. I looked at issues. And I kept asking the question, what can we do to break the cycle of poverty? We need to be able to do something. I'm doing something through the work that I'm doing on my boards. But equally important, if not more important, through actually founding Ariya Capital, the company that I run now—we are specifically focusing on investments in segments and industries where we are doing our part to break the cycle of poverty. That, in a nutshell, is

achieve so much more together than any one of us separately. And that really inspired the whole buddy system. Each disabled climber was teamed up with non-disabled buddies, one or more, depending on the

SF: Well, it seems like that is a huge lesson for those of us who spend a bunch of our lives helping, in helping professions, and certainly in church work, reaching out to places where things are not nearly as rich in terms of resources and all that. And yet there's no question that we are better off because of those experiences. We learn! We gain! So let's move into the whole idea, then, of the importance of this kind of mentality in Christian leaders—in any leaders. How do you think about that? Is this something that makes an organization, a company, a church, or a school a better

of your shell. Get out of that mentality of insufficiency (I need to hoard,

not to do the work of the Salvation Army." "We are not necessarily here to create a better world, because Jesus is coming soon in any event, so what's the big deal?" I had tremendous difficulties because of my Christian beliefs in communist Romania, since I did not go to school on Sabbath and refused to become a member of the Communist party. And a number of well-meaning church members said, "Herta, don't worry; Jesus is coming soon, so don't worry about getting a higher education, and don't worry about all these things. Jesus is coming soon." While this notion of the Second Coming of Christ is something so incredibly beautiful for evangelical Christians, it can also be, in a perverse sort of way, a deterrent to actually making this world a better place to live.



The philosophy of Martin Luther has been very inspirational to me because he said, "If I knew Jesus were coming tomorrow, I would plant a tree today." And that is a philosophy that I can latch on to because, yes, I hope Jesus comes tomorrow. When I see all the problems in this world, and my very limited ability to remedy just a very, very minute part of them, I want Jesus to come tomorrow. But I don't know if He's going to come tomorrow. What I do know is that I can plant some kind of tree today. So we have this desire to make an impact while we are on this earth and make this earth a better place. It doesn't have to be the devil's playground.

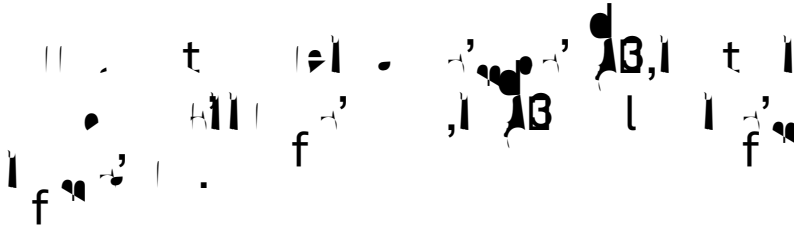
For some reason, God has chosen us to be His hands and His feet and His fingers. And it is not just about preaching the Gospel, as important as that may be. Quite frankly, when people are hungry, or they are emotionally devastated, or physically destitute, or whatever, they are not necessarily open to the Gospel. They need to have their physical needs met, they need to have their emotional needs met, before they can really accept help for their spiritual needs. And if it's just addressing the spiritual needs, it's actually a limited offer for help. Certainly we need to be effective Christians who don't just have a mouth, as Rick Warren put it, but who have a much more holistic impact on the world around us. We need to look at remedying the social ills; we need to use different methods and different vehicles to do that. The church is an amazing distribution platform for that. Business is also an amazing vehicle for that. I think if

how we really started to focus primarily on energy. Because if you don't have electricity, something that we take for granted, you will have very

HVS: Right now there is such a leadership vacuum, and I touched on the crisis that we are experiencing. It is not just of a financial nature or a political nature. It really is, at the core, a crisis of leadership. We need leaders who are able to relate to their fellow human beings in the way that Jesus wants us to, with a sense of dignity and respect and a desire to actually help and make a difference. So I think the world is yearning for leaders like that.

This is where the challenge comes for Christian leaders to actually step up to the plate. We tend to lament about the world being an unfair place, and an unjust place, and whatever, but what do we do about it? My father-in-law had this great expression: "If we let the devil sit in the front row all the time, then why are we complaining about the outcome?" I think this is a time for people who have a strong moral compass and a deep desire to make a difference to step up to the plate and provide the leadership that is

SF: We covered a lot of good ground, didn't we? Thank you so much! Do you want to close with any particular thing, or is there anything else you'd like to say?



HVS: Maybe just a thought for people who are looking for a way to start. When I led the Kilimanjaro expedition, I wanted to do a film, to capture this spirit of adventure and selflessness in a heartwarming documentary. That's what I wanted to do, but I had no inclination of actually writing a book. And it was really only afterward that I thought, goodness, I have learned so much, and I feel I'm a much better leader as a result of this. And so things just came together. I really would encourage your readers—I'm sure they are avid readers already—to read good practical things about how to make a difference. And certainly my book is only one of them; there are many other great books out there. Allow yourself to be inspired, to just reach a little higher, to do something tangible. Together we can make a positive difference in a world that desperately needs it.