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## PROFILE

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# Rigmor Nyberg

## Dialogue with the ADRA Director in Sweden

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**R**igmor Nyberg is the Director of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency for the Seventh-day Adventist Church in Sweden. Compassion for the underprivileged has been a recurring theme in her life.

Rigmor's long career in business began when she interrupted her

university studies to become the manager of a Swedish building firm. Her first exposure to the needs of the underprivileged in Africa and her initiation into the business world came when she was appointed to be the first woman business manager of the Ethiopian Adventist College in 1967. By the time she had finished her first stint in Africa, she had also worked for an Ethiopian telecommunication firm.

Rigmor returned home to Sweden with a greater sense of direction in her life. She earned an M.A. in civics, history, and economics. By this time she was married and had a daughter. In 1972 Rigmor and her family moved to Andrews University where she graduated with an M.B.A. three years later.

Although Rigmor and her husband returned to Sweden for a year, her heart was still with the needy in Africa. In 1976 she began working for the

Ethiopian Ministry of Agriculture as an administrator for SIDA, the Swedish International Development Agency. Later, as the chief auditor of SIDA dealt with high government officials at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. She was sometimes called to the Swedish parliament to give oral and written reports on development aid projects.

Rigmor's work began to take her away from home more than she wished. In order to spend more time with her daughter, she left SIDA and worked as business manager and teacher at Ekebyholmsskolan, the Seventh-day Adventist junior college in Sweden. In 1985, when her daughter was older, Rigmor accepted the Swedish Union's invitation to become the director of the Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) for that country.

**R**igmor, tell us first about the work of ADRA with the Swedish International Development Agency (SIDA).

The Swedish government has agreed to channel one percent of the country's gross national product to the developing countries. They want to reach the people with the most needs. SIDA has found that the churches, working as they do with people at grassroots level, provide an ideal network for this purpose. The Adventist Church is just one of 27 church organizations that work with SIDA on relief projects.

**So you are getting money from the Swedish government to finance the work of the Seventh-day Adventist Development and Relief Agency?**

That's right. The work of the Adventist Church is ideally suited to SIDA's objectives. The purpose of the development aid is to give

people a better future. SIDA does not give its attention to higher education for people in the developing world. It wants to put money into primary schools to make sure that people can read and write. It is concerned with basic preventive medicine, providing clinics, making sure people have clean water, teaching them agricultural and scientific gardening—that sort of thing. Many of these projects are exactly what the Adventist Church is involved in.

**You travel a lot, don't you? Where do you go and what do you do there?**

I travel four or five times a year

in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. Eighty percent of my trips take me to Africa. Basically, I talk to the people for whom the work is being done. I ask about their needs and evaluate what has been done.

**What would you say are your major achievements?**

It all depends on how you measure achievements. Some people are impressed by the fact that five years ago, the annual grant to ADRA from the Swedish government was about \$400,000. Today it is \$3 million. This covers the expenses of all the ADRA projects initiated by our office, both in Sweden and in the developing world. Our secretarial salaries, telephone expenses, and travel budgets are all financed by SIDA funds.

I'm delighted to see that the Adventist Church has been recognized and accepted as an aid or-

ganization. It is wonderful that the Adventist Global Mission is being extended with the help of SIDA funds. I feel too that there has been an awakening interest in ADRA among our church members and on the union board. The philosophy behind our mission work in general and ADRA in particular has been accepted.

**Is there another aspect of your work that gives you more satisfaction?**

Yes. What pleases me most is to learn that the people helped by our projects not only find a future for themselves but also learn about God. I was thrilled to learn that when some of our Adventist ladies in Kenya knew that a well had been drilled in one place, they went there and started Bible studies. After some time they could call a pastor, who baptized a group of men and women. These people had not just found water, they had found Living Water.

**What are the greatest problems you face in your work?**

Sometimes I don't feel I have any problems, but I do get frustrated when I sense that policies are being put before people. There are times when I feel that some of my colleagues care more about following the regulations so they can get promoted, than they do about working for people in need.

**Critics say that instead of ADRA going abroad and helping people with school buildings, clinics, and agricultural projects we should use all our resources and money for evangelistic campaigns so we can baptize as many people as possible. How would you answer them?**

One year ago we had a workshop in West Africa where we discussed the holistic approach for ADRA work. We never use resources for physical and/or material needs *instead* of spiritual needs. They must always go together. We try to follow Christ's example. He gave unconditionally, helping everyone who wanted help. He never asked if people

wanted to believe in Him. I feel very strongly that if people are hungry and naked and have nowhere to sleep, they are not open to our message. Once we have taken care of people's basic needs, they often want to know more about Christ.

**What advice would you give young people who might wish to work for ADRA?**

In Sweden there are many young people who would like to work for ADRA. They like the challenge and opportunity that travel presents. I suggest to them that they take a year off from their studies and go to work in the developing world. They need to experience the problems firsthand. I think it's important too that they get good training and become real professionals in their particular line of work.

**Has it been an advantage or a disadvantage to be a woman in your professional life?**

Both! I feel that many times we as women can see problems in a different way from men, somehow more holistically, and that affects the way we want to solve them. The difference in our approaches sometimes affects the relationships between me and my male colleagues.

On the other hand, I often feel that in developing countries, a woman who knows what she is talking about may be accepted more readily than a man. She poses less of a threat. In committees and groups in the West, however, women usually have to prove themselves before they can be accepted.

**What advice would you give to a young woman who is thinking of working for the church?**

We still have a bit to go. If a

woman feels called to work for the church, I would tell her to be as qualified as possible, to follow her calling, and to be patient. We have a big need for women leaders in our church, especially in our part of the world, where most of the members are women. It is so often easier for one woman to understand another.

**I understand that you are divorced and have been a single parent for the past thirteen years. How has that affected your work?**

Many times it has been difficult to balance my professional life with my private life. When my daughter started school, I was working at our junior college. I had to bring home work every night. And as soon as she went to bed I started my second day of work! Sometimes it has been a problem when I am sitting on committees and they go overtime. I have felt bad then, because I know my daughter is at home alone and I am late. I have tried as much as I can to give my daughter priority. For instance, I don't travel for more than two weeks at a time. And I am happy that we have the Sabbath.

**To what do you attribute your success?**

To the willingness of the church leaders to give women this kind of job, to an earnest interest in people and in my work, and to never being afraid of working long hours. I have also had a very supportive family. Both my parents and my sister and brothers, with their families, helped me when my daughter was younger. There have been ups and downs, but God has always been with me. I am very thankful for His love and for my work.

**Helen Pearson**

*Helen Pearson is completing a Master of Philosophy degree in religious journalism at the City University in London. Helen and her husband, Michael, teach at Newbold College, in England, and have two children.*