

Founder's Perspective
Remarks by Robert B. Cummings
Fortieth Anniversary Celebration
Vesper Society

What a tremendous disappointment for me to miss this 40th anniversary party. I owe my son Rob a great “thank you” for stepping in at the last moment to present my talk. For the last 40 of his 60 years he has heard Vesper Society discussed constantly.

I am sure this has been an extraordinary evening, made especially wonderful by the attendance of all of you. I know that Gene Heckathorn would have thoroughly enjoyed it. He loved a party.

To briefly review our origins:

Gene and I, as laymen concerned about the vulnerability of some of our Lutheran institutions, were happy to respond to Dr. Franklin Clark Fry's invitation to look and work on specific problem institutions. Our church had just experienced a merger of significant Lutheran national bodies in which we inherited each other's strengths and weaknesses. It was during such trouble shooting that it became evident that the common denominator for most of the problem situations was poor management – and in at least one situation a total lack of management. It was our hope that in establishing a new entity of laymen with demonstrated abilities, and of diverse business disciplines - could be networked – so there would be a resource available to the non-profit sector which could apply their expertise to such problems.

Dr. Woodford and I visited the countries of Trinidad and Jamaica where Vesper Society has had a long history of providing the services of skilled dentists to the underserved youth. In Trinidad this was being done in the institutions of Servol. Father Gerald Pantin, a Roman Catholic priest who founded Servol in 1970, published his book “The Silent Prophet” – rather than describing Servol as a network of 13 persons of diverse talents – he uses the word “web.” I think web is much more descriptive than network. Most of the people who have become part of the Society have become ensnared in a Web. As some attempted to observe the structure of this web, they became more and more attached. The Society then, which over the years has grown and in ever increasing ways, has been providing meaningful and diverse services to the needs of the eleemosynary world.

Certainly, if Gene were here tonight to celebrate this event, he would agree that the Society has expanded far beyond any expectation either of us could have envisioned in 1965. It's great sphere of important contributions is not the credit of two people who were having fun doing what was natural for them, but the countless number of persons – caught in that web – giving of their time, talent and treasure to the efforts of Vesper Society. Each and every person in this room has had a part – an important part – in giving life and breath to this vital living entity – and when I multiply that by the number of persons with whom you have had contact about Vesper Society matters, then the number grows to almost unbelievable proportions.

It is appropriate as we begin to think about the future to give pause and recognition to those who are not here in body, but certainly in spirit. To Dr. Franklin Clark Fry, President of the Lutheran Church in America who gave us the first challenge. Gene Heckathorn who caught the vision and was the engine that powered the dream into reality. Dr. Robert Adams who immediately joined and

supported the Medical Cabinet at Vesper Memorial. Mr. Jack Falkenberg, President of Vesper Memorial. Mr. Norman Miller, Treasurer of Vesper Memorial. Mr. Wayne Keufner, Member of the Board at Hayward Vesper. Dr. Henry Endress who gave us advice and council in our formative years as President of Lutheran Resources Commission and later as Director of Development for the Society.

I wish there was time to recognize all in the room tonight who have been so very important to the Society. If I start acknowledging each by name it would be impossible to find a stopping place. The last thing I want to do is to omit anyone. Would you permit me to express gratitude by saying a heart-felt thank you to each of you? You should feel good about yourself. “You did it the old fashioned way – you earned it.” Your support, effort, dedication and in a real sense – kinship – is the treasury of the Society and the joy of my life.

On the occasion of the sale of the two hospitals, the question was frequently asked of me. “What is Vesper Society going to do now?” The question would seem to suggest that the only activity of Vesper was the hospitals. Of course, they were a very important activity – one that commanded a great amount of investment of time and talent. Conservatively, I estimate that one-quarter million patients were provided medical care during 19 years of our administration and ownership of Vesper Memorial and Hayward Vesper Hospitals. That number refers only to those who came within the four walls of the institutions. Many, many more were influenced in Southern Alameda County through programs such as the Health Fairs, health education programs, nutrition counseling, WICK program, and on and on.

Before our involvement in those acute care hospitals, Vesper owned and operated a convalescent hospital in Santa Barbara, and provided management studies and feasibility surveys to acute hospitals, skilled nursing facilities, residential care and elderly housing projects in Kansas, Missouri, Indiana, Kentucky, Nebraska, Florida, Arizona, Pennsylvania, New York and Maryland.

The story used to be told that when Gene and I would go to the airline ticket counter to get a ticket we would respond to the question “Where did we want to go” by saying – “anywhere we’ve got business everywhere.” I think Margaret and Pauline believed that - we were almost anywhere but home those days, and Gene more so than me. We literally could buy a ticket to anywhere and find a need desperately requiring attention. The opportunities are limitless and multiply every day.

We have been said to be the “opportunists” and I make no apology about that. I hope the Society will always be alert and quick to seize opportunity. But recognizing opportunity is not in itself sufficient. Whether it be an individual, corporation or Society, one must position oneself – attain a stance – if you will, so as to capture the moment and turn the opportunity from dream to reality. Forty years of history – forty years of your time, talent, and treasure now results in the Society being in the best possible posture to move into its future.

If there is greatness in our Vesper Society – and I believe there is – I hope that it exists in the quality and context in which Phillips Brooks wrote in a sermon entitled Visions and Tasks. He said

It is not a question of greatness, but one of genuineness and completeness.
Just as the same chemical element must be in a rain-drop that are in Niagara Falls, and, if they are, then the rain-drop is as truly water as the cataract.

My hope for Vesper Society as it moves forward in the years ahead is that it will be genuine in its mission and complete in its motives.

If each of you continuing in service of Vesper Society – caught in the web – are also genuine and complete – the force can be as stupendous as Niagara. The challenge of the Society is to carefully take inventory of its unique abilities so that as it responds it does so only in those arenas where it can follow through either to seed a new worthwhile service or remain to a successful conclusion. Rather than flying off to everywhere it must be penetrating in its analysis of opportunities and prudent in its investment of time, talent and treasure so that the needs it addresses receive the most remedial effort.

Brooks based his sermon on the circumstance of the parable of the beasts, where Peter after having the vision while resting on the roof top was sitting there trying to glean out of it the meaning. Then there came to Peter word that three men were down at the gate seeking his help.

Today we have visions and dreams of what can be. It is good that we pause at this milepost and look at the possibilities ahead. But Brooks concludes his sermon by reminding us that it is a terrible thing to have seen the vision and be so wrapped up in contemplation as to not hear the knock of those needy hands upon our doors. And, it is a terrible thing to hear the knock and to have no vision to share.

Of course, it has been the loyalty of you who are here tonight to so faithfully carry on what was started 40 years ago.

It makes me so proud to see what great things you have been accomplishing. I know that Gene would join me congratulating you all.