

# **VESPER SOCIETY**

## **Christian Community of Mesoamerica (CCM): A Leadership Development Project In Central America**

*A Collaborative Project of  
Vesper Society and CCM*

2001

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**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Vesper has initiated a three-year leadership project with Comunidad Cristiana Mesoamericana (Christian Community of Mesoamerica or CCM), a network of 17 Central American faith-based organizations. The project is being implemented at a regional level utilizing a “shared-learning” model among the participating member organizations and the communities with whom they work.

During the first year of the project, the focus will be twofold:

1. **“Strengthen the institutions”** (member organizations) by strengthening the skills of the executive and middle management levels of the member organizations through training workshops and exchanges or visits by program staff of one organization to another CCM member organization;
2. **Develop youth leadership** through regional training of a cadre of youth leaders who will learn how to plan, organize, and implement a Youth Service Project and then a series of “youth community service projects” that will be carried out in host communities in El Salvador to help with the reconstruction.

The activities of the subsequent two years will be planned in the last quarter of the preceding year.

*Vesper is collaborating with CCM, a network of 17 Central American faith-based organizations.*

## I. STRATEGIC PLANNING FOR VESPER'S INVOLVEMENT IN CENTRAL AMERICA

### Overview

Vesper Society regularly reviews its major program areas to update information about current issues and to identify emerging topics. In this spirit, Vesper Society's Central America Program came under review in October 1999. A strategic planning process was established to provide long-term guidelines for Vesper's Central America Program. This planning process included several stages, each with decision points, extending over a period of many months. A description of the activities involved in developing the plan, project opportunities, and recommendations follow.

### Background

For over two decades, Vesper has conducted projects in Central America. Lessons that were learned from this work served as a fundamental component in our strategic thinking. However, we recognized that the reality of changing times required us to consider how those changes might influence the contextual framework of Vesper's work in Central America, and the impact on Vesper's role in the region. As a result, it was important to take steps to be attuned to current thinking.

This strategic plan needed to take into account multiple criteria, some based on Vesper's past work, some responding to factors identified by Vesper's Board, and some reflecting current conditions in Central America. The following are the key criteria for defining a project that Vesper might conduct in the region:

- Project should have a regional focus rather than be centered in one country. The implication of this charge was that the topic of the project had to have high interest and relevance across several countries. It could not be a topic that was relevant to one country but not to others.
- Project that fits into Vesper's overall program with components of leadership or health and an integration of faith-based values.

*Changing times influenced the conceptual framework of Vesper's current work in Central America.*

- Project that responded to a critical social or economic issue as identified from the interviews with trusted advisors.
- Project that fits the convening and catalyst characteristics of Vesper's projects.
- Project whose scope fit Vesper's financial and personnel resources.
- Project of sufficient scope that it might lead to other opportunities in the future.

### Activities

Development of the Strategic Plan involved three main activities. The first was a thorough review of past Vesper work in the region, with the goal of identifying strategies that worked well and that could be developed in further work. The second activity was oriented to the future and included interviews with a broad cross-section of trusted advisors throughout Central America. From this information, a list of critical issues for the Central American region was developed. A brief look at each activity follows.

*The project responds to critical social and economic issues as identified from interviews with trusted advisors.*

#### A. Review of Reports from Previous Related Vesper Projects

Vesper's recent work in Central America included 17 separate projects conducted over the last decade. The most extensive involved a series of roundtable conferences in Guatemala designed to support Guatemala's recovery from civil war and its progress toward development of a stable, peaceful nation. The plans for achieving that goal are described in the final report, *Visualizing Guatemala in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century – A Roundtable for Prosperity in the Americas: A Modern and Efficient State*.

Projects focusing on the Central American region included "The Central American Strategic Planning Process (CASP)" and "Encuentros: Public Sector Partnerships for Poverty Reduction." Vesper also sponsored a conference series, "The Role of the Business Sector in Sustainable Development in Central America."

#### B. Interviews with Leaders in Central America

Staff arranged meetings with key leaders in three countries--Honduras, Guatemala and El Salvador--to obtain their input on

current issues of importance across the Central American Region. Some of the individuals and the organizations with which they are affiliated were known to Vesper through previous projects. Other leaders became known to Vesper through the recommendations of “trusted advisors” in the region, or as a result of staff research on Central America.

The meetings were guided by a series of questions structured to elicit the issues and concerns that affected the region. Previously, Vesper conducted projects that were primarily country-specific; however, since one of Vesper’s goals was to transfer lessons learned from one setting to another, one purpose of the meetings was to identify issues that are common across countries and create a dialogue exploring the types of activities that could address those needs. Almost all of the interviews were conducted on-site in the offices of the individuals involved except for one which was held at a central location convenient to the individuals.

### **C. Critical Regional Issues**

The following is a list of the critical regional issues identified by key leaders.

1. Leadership development at the local level that integrates faith-based values and ethics into an overall program
2. Education and development involving organizations in several countries with the purpose of fostering exchange of knowledge and day-to-day experience
3. Poverty -- Identify and promote specific activities that communities might pursue to alleviate the pervasive poverty affecting many people
4. Health
5. Training in cutting edge use of technology
6. Education -- K-6 education for children in rural areas, as well as basic skills training to prepare people for jobs
7. Incorporating indigenous people into society so that they have more participation and a greater voice

8. Policy level dialogue for representatives of those countries involved in the civil wars of the '80s. Address the participatory role of citizens and how such participation can be cultivated across the sectors of society.

### **Opportunities for Vesper Projects**

The issues identified by key leaders provided guidelines for the next phase of Vesper's work. More specifically, staff focused on identifying potential projects involving regional organizations composed of local agencies, projects with faith-based values integrated into overall activities, projects fostering the exchange of knowledge, projects addressing poverty as a critical social issue, projects supporting leadership development at the local level, and projects incorporating indigenous people.

The procedure for defining such projects relied on background research and recommendations of trusted advisors. Background research conducted on the Internet produced information on a number of potential projects. At the same time, staff made contacts with advisors in Central America as well as in global organizations to solicit recommendations of projects that fit the criteria.

By using multiple research strategies, staff was able to use a procedure of triangulation to identify promising projects. Alternative techniques were used, and in some cases, the names of the same projects appeared regardless of which research technique was used.

A list of the most promising projects was prepared. Staff contacted each project, providing information on Vesper Society, explaining our strategic review of our Central America program, and expressing our interest in their project. The project was asked to send us information on themselves and their program.

Staff reviewed the information provided, and again narrowed the list to those projects that met most of the criteria. Directors of this smaller group of projects were contacted with a request for Vesper staff to meet with them and their associates, if they so chose. Staff then conducted site visits to this select group. As a result of following this process, one regional organization, Comunidad Cristiana Meso-

*Issues identified  
by key leaders  
provided  
guidelines for the  
next phase of  
Vesper's work.*

americana (CCM) emerged as clearly meeting the criteria established by Vesper Society for a collaborative project.

### **Findings**

The strategic review procedure worked well for Vesper as a process for identifying a Central American partnering organization, CCM, and a potential collaborative project. Although the procedure required considerable up-front preparation and research that took six months to complete, Vesper was satisfied that the resulting decision was based on solid criteria identified in advance and was well aligned with our mission and organizational focus. Work spent in due diligence at the beginning would pay off in the future in the project implementation stage. The following section describes the development of the project with CCM.

## II. THE CCM NETWORK

### Introduction

Vesper Society has developed a collaborative three-year project with CCM, a network of 17 faith-based organizations in Central America. (See Appendix B: CCM Member Organizations and Appendix C: Map of CCM Organizations by Country). This collaboration grew out of the common interest of all partners to utilize the expertise of member organizations in a peer shared-learning model focusing on leadership development. The project will be implemented over a three-year period from January 2001 through December 2003.

### Background

CCM member organizations share common interests and values that proceed from their faith-based perspectives and efforts to “create God’s kingdom here on earth.” This latter is accomplished through community development programs that respond to the spiritual, physical, social, and economic needs of the most marginalized and impoverished communities in the Central American region. CCM member organizations’ programs focus on the reconstruction of Central America in response to natural disasters such as hurricanes, earthquakes and floods which are endemic to the region. CCM members also share the common history of helping their communities survive and recover from the destruction and losses caused by civil wars that took place throughout the region for many years. CCM views poverty and the crushing foreign debt as factors that their programs must consider in designing strategies to maximize the use of local resources, both human and natural.

Many Central American countries lost generations of leaders as a consequence of the violence of civil war and the loss of life attributable to natural disasters, such as Hurricane Mitch. In Guatemala, for example, civil war lasted for thirty-six years and it is estimated that more than 200,000 people lost their lives in that conflict. The need for leaders who can help guide local communities through the restoration and recovery process is great. Vesper’s model

*CCM’s programs respond to the needs of the most marginalized and impoverished communities.*

is to assist people to develop their own leadership skills; thereby, providing a legacy for the future.<sup>1</sup>

Vesper Society's interest in Central America has extended over several years as a catalyst toward peace. As previously mentioned, Vesper convened a number of dialogues during the civil war years in El Salvador, Nicaragua, and Guatemala to explore common ground upon which peace was eventually built. Later, Vesper convened a series of dialogues which focused on topics important in the restoration of civil society in those countries following the conflict.

Vesper's interest in Central America coincides with CCM's focus on improving the quality of life for Central American communities marginalized by poverty and the consequences of civil war and natural disasters. CCM has placed a high priority on the need for leadership development as a critical step in strengthening the organizational capacity of its members to respond to this mission. Vesper's interest in Central America and leadership development coincided with CCM's efforts to initiate a regional approach to leadership development. This collaborative project is the result.

*Vesper's interest in Central America and leadership development coincided with CCM's efforts to initiate a regional approach to leadership development.*

### **Purpose**

The purpose of the project is to implement a regional model of leadership and professional development for program staff of faith-based non-governmental organizations in Central America. The anticipated outcome is improved leadership capacity in CCM organizations to serve their constituents - the poorest and most marginalized communities of Central America.

### **Project Goals**

The project incorporates the following goals:

- *Develop staff* to become leaders in identified program areas in CCM organizations

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<sup>1</sup> More discussion of other leadership development models used by Vesper can be found in the series of monographs, *Vesper Leadership Series*, which can be requested via email.

- ***Strengthen the institutional capacity*** of the CCM organizations to serve their constituencies in identified program areas
- ***Foster the exchange of information*** among CCM member organizations relating to successful service delivery strategies
- ***Provide opportunities*** at a professional peer level for the sharing of expertise in identified program areas between the staffs of partnered organizations through mentoring, shadowing and “peer-coaching”

### III. PROJECT DESIGN

#### Approach/Method

A key issue for CCM is the need for development and training of faith-based leaders in order to carry out community development at the local level. The project's methodology encourages active and equitable participation of staff from all seventeen organizations. It identifies needs, sets a plan, provides training for staff and organizations, and develops a dynamic spirit of creativity in the work. The approach uses a "shared-learning" model (South-South) in which trainers from the lead organizations will work with personnel of member organizations who are less developed. The following is a summary of specific steps taken in preparation and first year implementation.

#### Preparatory Phase

CCM successfully implemented a six-month preliminary phase (July through December 2000) during which key activities were carried out in preparation for the longer-term project implementation. These included the following:

1. Development of a CCM web page and portal to make information related to the project accessible to member organizations and promote interactive information exchange;
2. A pilot training activity on the topic of "Program Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation" (Honduran organization provided the training and information exchange to an El Salvadoran organization); and
3. A community-to-community exchange involving farmer/growers from Honduras and Guatemala entitled "Sharing appropriate technologies: Agroecology and the improvement of seed stock."

The pilot projects served to test various logistical aspects and the dynamics of these types of exchanges between organizations and communities. The knowledge gained from the pilot training activities was applied to the planning and implementation process for the next phase.

*CCM uses a shared-learning model in which trainers from lead organizations work with member organizations who are less developed.*

### Needs Assessment

The information gathered in the needs assessment conducted during the preparatory phase has been integrated into a database of the member organizations located on the CCM web site.<sup>2</sup> The database identifies organizational strengths and expertise in program areas and personnel. From the needs assessment emerged the selection and prioritization of desired training topics, as well as identification of lead organizations to serve as trainers in their areas of strength.

The two program areas determined to be of highest priority and to be addressed during the first project year are as follows:

- Leadership Strengthening: Building organizational capacity of leadership in organizational and project management and communication systems
- Youth Leadership

Other program areas from which topics may be selected to address in years two and three include the following:

- Theological Reflection: Contribute to the discussion and search for socioeconomic alternatives from the vantage point of poverty and unequal status
- Gender Equality: Promoting gender equity as intrinsic to developmental activities
- Community Development: Contribute to the creation of conditions that advocate sustainable development from the local perspective (i.e., indigenous population)
- Access to Justice and Social Security: To advocate from a Biblical basis for reduction of violence, corruption, impunity and racial discrimination

***Leadership strengthening and youth leadership are the two program areas for the first year of the project.***

### Project Coordination

CCM has established a Coordinating Committee composed of the following individuals:

Rev. Dr. Benjamin Cortes (CIEETS/Nicaragua)  
CCM Vice-President

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<sup>2</sup> CCM's website address is [www.ccmrrhh.org](http://www.ccmrrhh.org)

Nora Coloma (CIEDEG/Guatemala)  
CCM Treasurer

Dr. Carlos Tamez (CLADEC/Mexico)  
CCM Project Technical Consultant

Daniel Medina (CCD/Honduras)  
CCM Project Coordinator/Communication Liaison

Noemi Espinoza, CCM Board President (ex officio member)

*The Coordinating Committee monitors the development and implementation of the project and reviews the evaluation results.*

The Coordinating Committee monitors the development and implementation of the project and reviews the evaluation results. The technical consultant will provide informational updates to participating member organizations and Vesper Society. Maria Elena Riddle is the project contact person on behalf of Vesper Society. Daniel Medina is the project contact person for CCM.

## **Training Activities**

### Leadership Strengthening

Two weeklong regional training activities are scheduled for the purpose of building the organizational capacity of CCM members to better serve their communities by developing the leadership skills and competencies of key staff. These workshops will involve 20 staff at various levels: directors, administrators or program managers, technical and operational staff. Topics will include institutional and program planning, management strategies, program administration, human relations, and resource development. A curriculum will be developed to guide the training.

In addition, four institutional exchanges or visits will occur during the first year. One level of exchanges will be from lead organization to learning organizations. Staff from the organization needing to improve a program area will make an extended visit to the lead organization. The visit will be structured to last from one week to two weeks depending on the circumstances of the agencies. While they are there, staff will have the opportunity to observe and ask questions of “expert” program staff about all aspects of the program, be mentored by senior staff, and shadow their counterparts in the host organization.

In addition to the staff exchanges, CCM organizations will host a second level of exchanges. These will be community to community

information sharing and visits. For example, an organization interested in developing or improving a particular program might visit a CCM host community where such a program has been in operation for several years. Community members can share how the program got underway in their community, what obstacles may have been present, successful strategies used, and the differences now evident in the fabric of the community's life. These community exchanges will be supported and organized by the "host" CCM organization.

Thus, the project incorporates three practical dimensions:

1. Information and experiential *exchanges* of "human resources" that occur through structured visits from one organization to another (staff to staff) and from one community to another (community leaders to community leaders).
2. Regional training *workshops* based on the pedagogical concept of Practice-Theory-Practice that is conducted on a South-South peer shared-learning model.
3. Development of *training curriculum* that will make the training and leadership development more academic and systematic in nature. CCM is seeking accreditation of their training activities by a university.

*The youth leadership training will reinforce their leadership roles with organizational competencies and planning skills.*

#### Youth Leadership Development

Local youth group leaders from the CCM organizations will prepare for and participate in a regional training activity, consisting of a weeklong series of workshops and activities. The purpose of the training will be to reinforce their leadership roles with organizational competencies and planning skills.

Two youth leadership exchanges will be scheduled during vacations and school breaks in which youth leaders from one Central American community will visit another community and participate in a community service project.

Year 1 of the project began with the tragic series of earthquakes in El Salvador. Despite this occurrence, an initial youth visit or "exchange" to El Salvador took place as planned. The purpose of this visit was to introduce the representative youth leaders from the various communities to each other, establish a core planning group, and

discuss what types of topics should be covered in the regional training. This meeting served as a type of focus group to elicit the opinions of the youth leaders of what would be of high interest, value, and have practical application to their local circumstances and resources. A training agenda for the regional workshop is taking shape from this discussion. The youth representatives suggested that their community service projects that will take place after the training be organized to support the reconstruction activities in El Salvador.

### **Training at Local Level**

Upon returning to the home organization, staff will share with their colleagues what they have learned. They will make recommendations to the administration of their own organizations regarding modifications or improvements needed in the program area in order to reach a higher level of functioning.

### Evaluation

Staff will evaluate their visits to better define what they have learned and how the information can be applied to their own programs and constituents. The CCM Coordinating Committee will evaluate all staff visits and information exchange to determine the impact on program areas.

### Potential Outcomes

The project has the potential to train CCM staff to provide services not previously provided effectively by their organizations. These services will directly impact families and communities affected by natural disasters and poverty. In addition, the project will strengthen CCM member organizations by generating a model of self-sustainability that they can use in the future to address continuing staff leadership development needs.

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**APPENDIX A:****STRATEGIC PLANNING: CONSULTATIONS ON REGIONAL NEEDS  
LIST OF INDIVIDUALS INTERVIEWED AND ORGANIZATIONAL AFFILIATIONS**

Ing. Maria del Carmen Acena  
Centro de Investigaciones Economicas Nacionales  
(CIEN – Center for National Economic Research)  
Academician  
Guatemala City, Guatemala

Luis Balmore Amaya  
Communications Director  
Lutheran Synod of El Salvador

Rev. Abelina Centeno de Gomez  
Lutheran Synod of El Salvador

Daniel Medina  
Coordinator of Planning and Evaluation  
Christian Community Development (CCD)  
Tegucigalpa, Honduras

Lic. Wilson Romero  
Unidad Revolucionaria Nacional Guatemalteca  
(URNG- Guatemalan National Revolutionary Unity)  
Political Strategist  
Guatemala City, Guatemala

Mauricio Silva  
Former Vesper Society Board Member  
San Salvador, El Salvador

Jose Jorge Siman  
Chief Executive Officer  
Vipsal #250  
San Salvador, El Salvador

Tim Wheeler  
Christian Community Development (CCD)  
Coordinator of Visiting Volunteer Delegations  
Tegucigalpa, Honduras

Lic. Raquel Zelaya  
Asociacion de Investigacion y Estudios Sociales  
(ASIES- Association of Research and Social Studies )  
Former Secretary of Peace  
Guatemala City, Guatemala

**APPENDIX B:**  
**CCM MEMBER ORGANIZATIONS**

Asociación Cristiana de Educación y Desarrollo (ALFALIT)  
El Salvador

Comisión de Acción Social Menonita (CASM)  
Honduras

Comisión Cristiana de Desarrollo (CCD)  
Honduras

Centro de Estudios y Publicaciones (CEP-ALFORJA)  
Costa Rica

Centro de Educación Promocional Agraria (CEPA)  
Nicaragua

Consejo de Iglesias Evangélicas Pro-Alianza Denominacional (CEPAD)  
Nicaragua

Conferencia de Iglesias Evangélicas de Guatemala (CIEDEG)  
Guatemala

Centro Interclesial de Estudios Teológicos y Sociales (CIEETS)  
Nicaragua

Centro Latino Americano de Educacion y Cultura (CLADEC)  
Mexico

Concientización para la Recuperación Espiritual y  
Económica del Hombre (CREDHO)  
El Salvador

Socorro Luterano Salvadoreño (SLS)  
El Salvador

**APPENDIX B, CONTINUED****Fraternal Members**

Alianza de Mujeres Costarricenses (AMC)  
Costa Rica

Asociación de Organismos no Gubernamentales (ASONOG)  
Honduras

Centro de Estudios Económicos, Políticos y Sociales (CEPS)  
Honduras

Centro de Estudios y Promoción Social (CEPS)  
Nicaragua

Coordinadora de Proyectos de Educación de Desarrollo Ecológico (COPREDE)  
Guatemala

Fundacion Nuevo Chiapas  
Mexico

Grupo “Mazorca” – Calpulli  
Mexico

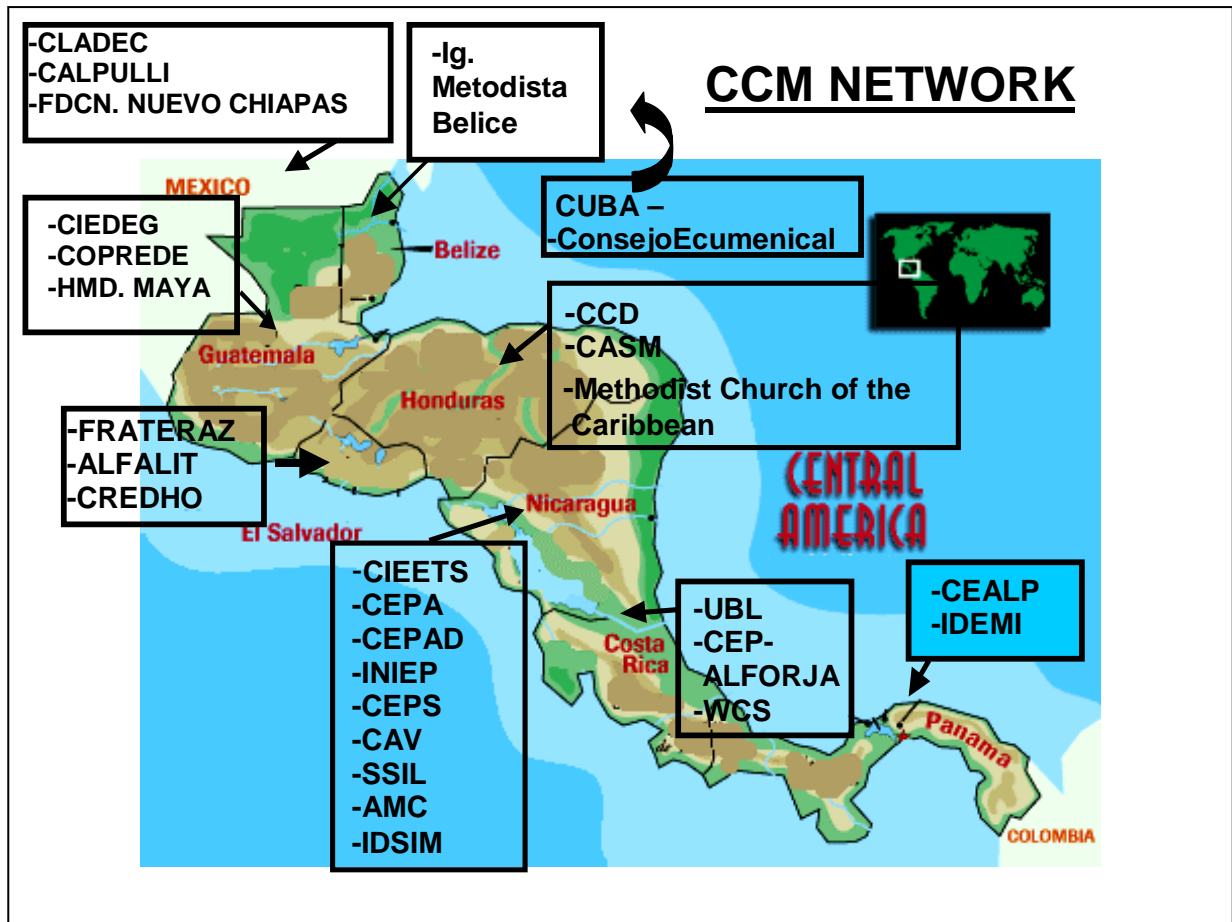
Hermanidad Maya  
Guatemala

Instituto Nicaragüense de Investigación y Educación Popular  
"Edgard Silva Solórzano" (INIEP)  
Nicaragua

Programa Regional Coordinador de Educación Popular (ALFORJA)  
Costa Rica

Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS)  
Proyecto Corredor Biológico Centroamericano  
Costa Rica

**APPENDIX C:  
MAP OF CCM ORGANIZATIONS BY COUNTRY**



*To request additional copies or more information  
about Vesper Society and its programs,  
contact us at the address below.*



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