

Our History: A Journey of Vocation

For 45 years Vesper Society has provided tools, expertise and funding to meet social, health and spiritual needs of people across the globe. Our co-founders dreamed of laypeople like themselves living out their faith in the world, using their skills for the betterment of humankind. Our history is a journey toward that dream.

A desire to serve inspired Gene Heckathorn and Bob Cummings to launch the Society in 1965. The two businessmen were cooling their heels at a Philadelphia bar and grill after a day of work on behalf of the national Lutheran body. At the church's invitation, Heckathorn and Cummings were sharing their management expertise with the denomination's non-profit agencies. While they discussed their work, they realized that other business leaders and professionals would be thrilled to have the church affirm their gifts and send them out to serve the church's ministries.

It was the proverbial "napkin moment." On the back of a placemat, Heckathorn and Cummings sketched out their idea of a network of laypeople whose expertise could be called upon by faith-based nonprofit organizations. But what to call this network? Well, the restaurant's name, Vesper, was handy, and it sounded religious. Thus, the enterprise was born.

In 1965 consulting work led to a management contract and then ownership of a Lutheran-affiliated hospital in San Leandro, California. In 1978 the Society acquired a second hospital in nearby Hayward. The Society used the hospitals as centers of practice and reflection, and as springboards for broader political, cultural and religious engagement.

In 1984 the Society sold the two hospitals for about \$40 million, paid off debts, and used the remaining funds – more than \$23 million – to establish a nonprofit organization. Since then we have invested in local and overseas health care projects, including one of the first hospice care programs in the U.S., an urgent care clinic that serves the under- and uninsured, mental health services for young people coping with the challenges of adolescence, and a pioneering South African AIDS program that ties antiretroviral therapy to the rituals of a faith community. Furthermore, we have broadened our focus to include youth development, economic justice, and religious pluralism – issues areas in which the Society has discerned a call.

Gene Heckathorn died in 1973, and Bob Cummings passed away in 2010. Both men believed in the possibility of a better world. Their vocation was to journey toward this vision with others. We are grateful for the privilege to do the same.



believing in individuals, creating opportunities