

Co-operative Identity At Stake –

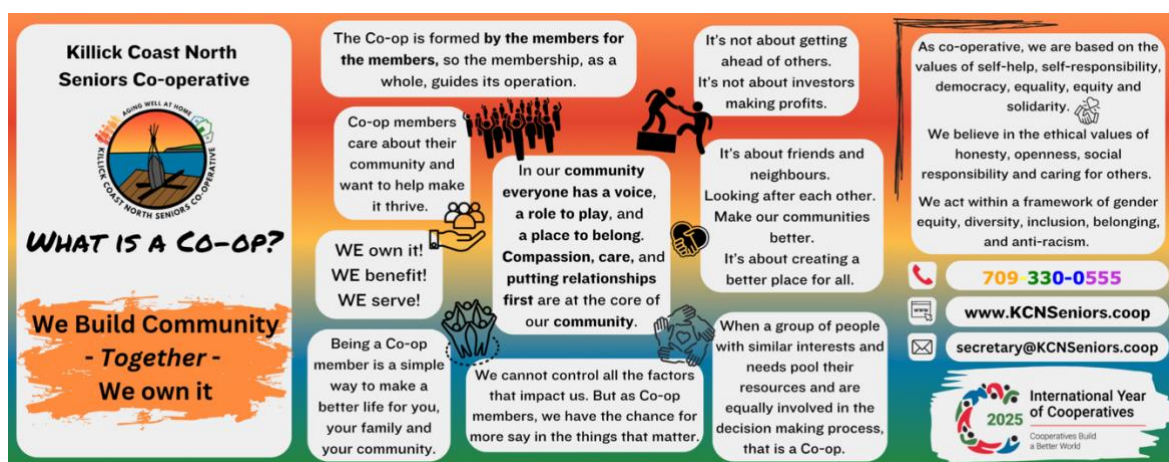
How do we develop communities of compassion, care, and love?

by Thomas Mengel

Introduction

We had a blast driving across the rocky Island of Newfoundland, off the Atlantic Coast of Canada, to the 2025 Convention and AGM of the ‘NL Federation of Co-operatives (NLFC)’, September 26-27, 2025¹, in Corner Brook. Jimmy, Ken, and I, enjoyed each other’s company and we shared a deep love for the cooperatives we are part of. We were confident in contributing meaningfully to the cooperative movement, and we were hopeful for overcoming the setbacks we had just experienced in our own cooperatives.

Previously, I had described the development of the ‘Killick Coast North Seniors Co-operative’, a community that helps seniors “age well at home”². Now, our Cooperative’s growth stagnated. We have already invested in values-oriented community building through common-meals, a strategy meeting for all members, and educational material highlighting the community values of the cooperative. Inspired by the global ‘Charter For Compassion’³ and the provincial ‘Relationships First NL’ Restorative Justice⁴ movement, we have placed the values of compassion, care, and putting relationships first at the core of our educational material.



¹ see <https://nlfc.coop/events/nlfc-agm-76/>.

² See <https://kcnseniors.coop/>; Mengel, T. (2025). *The Future is Cooperative – What might it look like and how do we get there?* in: *Communities*, Issue 206, Spring 2025. *Global Ecovillage Network United States*. pp. 31-34.

³ Charter For Compassion (2025). Available at <https://charterforcompassion.org>. The ‘Charter of Compassion’ is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization registered in the US and supporting “the emerging global movement of compassion” and envisioning a “transformed world where all life flourishes with compassion”. The Charter organization works in seven pillars of engagement including from Arts, Education, Health, Justice, and Love; it *builds and fosters compassionate communities*, provides compassionate education, supports kids and youth; and it promotes conversations, for example by building Human Bridges, supporting Life Purpose Groups, and by fostering Peace by 2030 initiatives.

⁴ Relationships First NL (n.d.). Available at <https://www.rfnl.org>.

Currently, we are exploring additional opportunities for community building, including another vision-and-strategy meeting early in 2026. Some of us have connected with and volunteer for external organizations offering compassionate care for aging people with declining health and supporting the building of compassionate communities⁵. In addition, implementing a pastoral care volunteer position as part of the Cooperative's service portfolio might be helpful in expanding the existing friendly visit service. Such a service can support seniors in navigating challenging transitions and in exploring meaningful life choices. This initiative might also help strengthen the sense of belonging to the Cooperative by developing meaningful relationships and fostering deeper conversations between members of various religious or non-religious backgrounds.

The 'Sunrise Funeral Co-operative'⁶, incorporated on June 21, 2024, follows the model already established in other Canadian provinces and internationally. I am a founding member and have been elected as Director-at-large of the board for 2024-2027.



Membership in the co-operative has grown significantly since incorporation (100+ members as of November 2025), mainly through offering a significant discount for funeral services. However, member engagement is very limited, and the night before our journey to Corner Brook, we had to adjourn the AGM for the Funeral Cooperative without

being able to conduct any business due to the lack of quorum. We currently are exploring options to address these challenges through a focus on community development based on solidarity, compassion, and care.

We know our cooperatives are not alone in this challenge. For the seventh consecutive year, a survey of Canadian cooperative leaders found that the lack of awareness of the cooperative model continues to be the most pressing and important challenge facing the cooperative sector⁷. Now was the time to explore actionable solutions together.

Co-operative Identity Development

Inspired by my most recent involvement in the membership driven process of reviewing the values and visions of the 'Social Justice Co-operative NL' as described in their "[Revolution of Care Manifesto](https://www.sjcnl.ca/our-vision)"⁸, we prepared a panel for the convention in Corner Brook, addressing the issue of

⁵ For example, Nav-CARE (n.d.). Making A Difference, Making Connections. Available at <https://www.nav-care.ca>; Nav-CARE (2025). Eastern Health, Newfoundland and Labrador. Available at <https://peolc.easternhealth.ca/ourservices/nav-care/>; Compassionate, Dementia Inclusive Communities (CDIC) Project (n.d.) BC Centre for Palliative Care. Available at <https://www.bc-cpc.ca/about-us/activities/new-projects/compassionate-dementia-inclusive-communities-project-2024-2027/>.

⁶ See <https://sunrisefuneral.coop/>.

⁷ Yu, S.; and Rizvi, S.J.R. (2025). The 2024 Top Co-op Issues Survey Report. Canadian Centre For The Study Of Co-operatives (CCSC). Saskatoon, SK, Canada: 2025, p. 1. Available at <https://usaskstudies.coop/documents/research-reports/2024-top-co-op-issues-survey-report.pdf>

⁸ Revolution of Care Manifesto (n.d.). Social Justice Co-operative Newfoundland and Labrador. Available at <https://www.sjcnl.ca/our-vision>.

cooperative identity. Panel participants highlighted the value of cooperative education and community building. Speakers from the audience acknowledged that member engagement beyond the receipt of services and benefits remains challenging. We concluded that we needed to make cooperative values like care and compassion the hallmark of our communities. One member of the audience interestingly suggested that while cooperatives are not religious organizations maybe we can learn from faith communities how to develop a sense of belonging.



The harm and hurt resulting from the experiences of abuse and violence accompanying religious movements notwithstanding, the concepts of love, compassion, and care are central to communities within various religious and non-religious perspectives. These concepts may be the only way to overcome traumata resulting from and tensions between belief systems and build compassionate communities that we and others want to be part of.

About the early *Christian* communities, the Roman historian Tertullian wrote: “See how they love one another”⁹. Charity is described as loving and acting service to community members and to outsiders in need.

In *Buddhism*, the concept of loving-kindness is central, cultivated through meditation and compassion aiming at alleviating suffering of self and all beings.

Hinduism encompasses various forms of selfless love and devotion, expanding one’s concern beyond the self to see dignity in all beings and encouraging an altruistic approach.

In *Islam*, compassion and caring for the needy, charitable giving, and general kindness are key attributes of our being and doing.

In *Judaism*, enduring love is a key concept, a principle of action, and a moral obligation to build a just society. Acts of loving-kindness are expressions of faith and include providing for the vulnerable, welcoming guests, and giving charity.

Secular Humanism also emphasizes the centrality of love, compassion, and concern for all beings; the dignity of every human being; and the pursuit of individual and communal well-being and happiness. These foundations of the humanist life stance are derived from a naturalistic and evidence-based philosophy of human nature and well-being.

⁹ Tertullian, The Apology, Chapter 39

Religious and philosophical underpinnings may differ between worldviews. However, the concepts of love, compassion, and care are central to communities within many religious and non-religious perspectives. Religious or not, cooperative communities today can glean from this love-compassion-care-based approach and relationship-building.

While secularism is on the rise and religious affiliation is declining, the need for meaningful life choices, deep relationships, and compassionate care communities is a core human need. Supporting those needs through pastoral care services at the community level can become a core service for cooperative communities. These services can cater to both, religious and non-religious members. They can even facilitate meaningful conversations and common projects between the different religious and non-religious worldview traditions¹⁰.

Humanistic, Co-operative Relationship Building

The editors of “Humanistic Governance in Democratic Organizations – The Cooperative Difference”¹¹ argue that “real participation” and “dignity” require more than having a democratic structure on paper. They must be embodied in the organization’s culture, processes, and relationships. The editors’ recommendations may help ensure genuine participation and dignity:

1. Embed dignity as a guiding principle

Human beings, not capital, are the purpose of the organization. Decisions should be evaluated by how they affect people’s capacity for autonomy, growth, and belonging. Dignity, defined as “recognition of each person’s intrinsic worth, voice, and contribution”, must be explicitly protected by governance in mission statements and performance measures.

2. Design inclusive and dialogical governance processes

Decision-making should allow genuine deliberation, based on dialogue between and listening to all members and stakeholders. This requires including human needs and ethics in the decision-making processes and developing close relationships on a human level. It requires time and effort to get to know one another and to appreciate each other as fellow human beings with dignity, compassion, and love. Such communication and decision-making require processes, methods, and formats that support this approach.

3. Cultivate competence and capacity among members

¹⁰ Non-religious and interfaith pastoral care services are already offered in several countries for key sectors like the military, education, health services, and penitentiaries. The community sector in general to date only offers those services scarcely, mostly leaving it to religious organizations to cater to their members in terms of pastoral services. Where existent, chaplains (or pastoral care workers) with various religious backgrounds offer these services to all, regardless of their religious or non-religious worldviews (through full-time or part-time, paid or volunteer positions). Non-religious (including Humanist) chaplains (or pastoral care workers) are only slowly on the rise as part of the interpath teams providing these services.

¹¹ Novković, S.; Miner, K.; & McMahon, C. (2023). Humanistic Governance in Democratic Organizations. The Cooperative Difference. Humanism in Business Series. Palgrave MacMillan: Open Access. Available at <https://link.springer.com/book/10.1007/978-3-031-17403-2>.

Participation in such processes requires skills that need to be developed. Appropriate education and mentoring sessions need to be offered to ensure members can comfortably engage in those dialogues and contribute meaningfully to strategic and ethical decisions.

4. Balance expertise and democracy

Expertise of professionals must serve, not replace, democratic control. While leveraging professional knowledge and management processes, members need to remain in control to avoid “democracy theater” with pro-forma participation and predetermined decisions.

5. Foster a culture of care and mutual respect

Dignity is lived through relationships. To enable and support these, the co-operatives need to nurture empathy and solidarity across all roles and stakeholders, compassionate communication (Non-Violent Communication; NVC), and conflict-resolution systems grounded in restorative, not punitive, approaches. The recognition of contributions, including emotional and care labor, needs to be included in governance metrics.

6. Maintain reflexivity and feedback loops

Governance should include mechanisms to continuously question and renew itself. This can be achieved through regular member surveys and deliberative assemblies, through evaluations of participation quality (not only quantity), and through open discussions about whether people feel heard and respected.

7. Guard against drift toward market-driven governance

As cooperatives start to grow and to act within “the market”, they risk mimicking market-driven behaviours of corporate entities. This risk can be mitigated by implementing term limits and rotation in governance roles, by participatory budgeting and community review of strategic plans, and by embedding cooperative identity indicators in performance evaluation.

8. Extend dignity beyond the organization

Humanistic governance is relational and ecological. Decisions should consider the dignity of stakeholders of partners, communities, and the environment beyond the co-op. This external dimension also reinforces internal dignity. A cooperative that treats others with respect reinforces its own identity as a humane enterprise.

Next Steps and Recommendations

As long as members of our cooperatives and the public don’t see and feel the difference between a cooperative community and other organizations, our cooperatives will stay behind their potential of “building a better society” and “humanizing the economy”¹². If compassion, care, and love are not visible and palpable within and around our cooperative communities they will continue to solely be the plaything of competitive market dynamics of capitalism.

¹² Restakis, J. (2010). Humanizing the Economy. Co-operatives in the Age of Capital. Gabriola Island, BC: New Society Publishers. P. 88.

I hope the following steps and recommendations will help our (and your) cooperative communities to become and develop as (com-) passionate, caring, and loving communities:

1. Integrate *humanistic cooperative relationship* building into your *community building*¹³.
2. Utilize resources from the *Charter for Compassion*¹⁴, which offers a *resourceful global home and supportive local communities* for compassionate community building.
3. *Connect and co-operate* with community and care oriented initiatives and programs *in your area or even on a provincial/state level* that share your core values and that align with your vision and mission.
4. Consider offering *non-religious pastoral care services* and facilitating *multi-path conversations and initiatives* inclusive of non-religious and religious worldview traditions. These services can be implemented as paid or volunteer positions within communities or at the level of regional or provincial/state associations or federations.
5. Let's *be bold in creating "love communities"*¹⁵ for the future.

"The old world is dying, and the new world struggles to be born: now is the time of monsters" (Antonio Gramsci)¹⁶. While this statement was coined during the rise of fascism almost one hundred years ago, we again find ourselves in an era of transition where the "monsters" of authoritarianism and fascism threaten our democratic and human values. We need "love communities" to resist that threat. Love in the sense of deeply caring for each other, of acknowledging the dignity of every human being, and in compassionately being with one another. Love will not avoid conflict, but it will offer ways of peaceful and compassionate resolution of those conflicts, and it will *allow cooperative communities to develop a strong and sustainable identity, based on enduring personal relationships, and building a sense of belonging and of being at home.*



¹³ Novković et al., *ibid*.

¹⁴ Charter For Compassion (2025). *Ibid*.

¹⁵ Love Community (n.d.) One Community. Available at <https://onecommunityranch.org/love-community/>.

¹⁶ For more on A. Gramsci, 1891-1937, Italian Marxist, philosopher, and political theorist and activist, see <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/gramsci/>.