# Co-operative Identity At Stake:
How do we develop communities of compassion, care, and love?

By Thomas Mengel

We had a blast driving across the rocky Island of Newfoundland, Canada. We were on our way to Corner Brook to attend the 2025 Convention and Annual General Meeting of the Newfoundland Federation of Co-operatives (NLFC), September 26-27, 2025.[1] Jimmy, Ken, and I enjoyed each other's company and we shared a deep love for our cooperatives. We were confident in contributing meaningfully to the cooperative movement, and we were hopeful for overcoming the setbacks we experienced in our own cooperatives.

In early 2025 I wrote about the development of the Killick Coast North Seniors Co-operative, a community helping seniors "age well at home."[2] Yet our cooperative's growth has since 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 Newfoundland Restorative Justice[4] movement, we have placed the values of compassion, care, and putting relationships first at the core of our educational material.
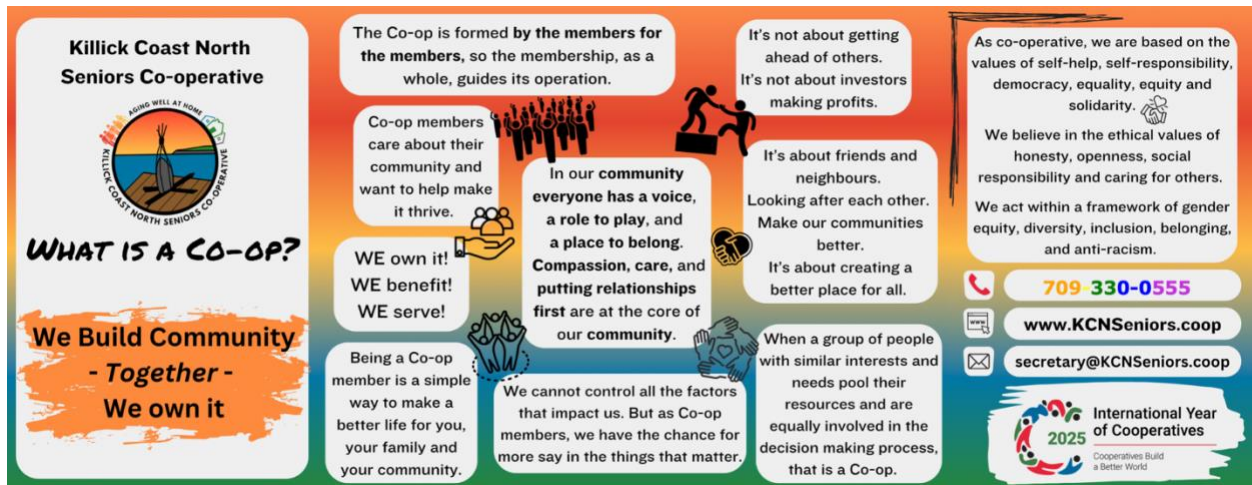
Currently, we are planning another vision-and-strategy meeting early in 2026. Some of us volunteer for external organizations offering compassionate care for aging people with declining health and supporting the building of compassionate communities.[5] In addition, I believe

[1] See nlfc.coop/events/nlfc-agm-76.

[2] See 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 charterforcompassion.org.

[4] Relationships First NL (n.d.). Available at www.rfnl.org.

[5] For example, Nav-CARE (n.d.). Making A Difference, Making Connections. Available at www.nav-care.ca; Nav-CARE (2025). Eastern Health, Newfoundland and Labrador. Available at peolc.easternhealth.ca/ourservices/nav-care; Compassionate, Dementia Inclusive Communities (CDIC)

implementing a pastoral care volunteer position would help expand the existing friendly visit service. Pastoral care can support seniors in navigating challenging transitions and in exploring meaningful life choices. This initiative might also help fostering deeper conversations between members of various religious and non-religious backgrounds.

Another co-op, 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 cooperative has grown significantly since incorporation, mainly through offering a substantial discount for funeral services. However, member engagement is very limited. The night before our journey to Corner Brook, we had to adjourn the AGM without conducting any business due to the lack of quorum. We currently are exploring options to address this challenge through a focus on community development based on solidarity, compassion, and care.

We know our cooperatives are not alone in addressing 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 sector.[7]

Co-operative Identity Development

During the convention in Corner Brook, we conducted a panel addressing the issue of cooperative identity. We concluded that we needed to provide cooperative education and 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 we could 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 want to be part of.

About the early *Christian* communities, the Roman historian Tertullian wrote: "See how they love one another."[8] 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.

Project (n.d.) BC Centre for Palliative Care. Available at www.bc-cpc.ca/about-us/activities/new-projects/compassionate-dementia-inclusive-communities-project-2024-2027.

[6] See 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 usaskstudies.coop/documents/research-reports/2024-top-co-op-issues-survey-report.pdf

[8] Tertullian, The Apology, Chapter 39

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.

For *Sikhism* compassion, unconditional love, and the well-being of the whole universe are central virtues and the cornerstone of their faith. These translate into the generous sharing of knowledge, meals, and other community services.

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.

For *First Nations, Metis, Innuit,* and other *indigenous worldviews*, interconnection is at the core. Everything in the universe is connected and is worthy of respect and caring.

Secular Humanism 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.

Religious and philosophical underpinnings may differ between worldviews. However, cooperative communities today can glean from this love-compassion-care-based approach and relationship-building so central to many belief systems.

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 traditions.

Humanistic, Cooperative Relationship Building

The editors of "Humanistic Governance in Democratic Organizations—The Cooperative Difference" recommend "real participation" and "dignity" to be embodied in the organization's culture, processes, and relationships as follows[9]:

1. Embed dignity as a guiding principle

Human beings 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

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

of each person's intrinsic worth, voice, and contribution," must be explicitly protected in mission statements and performance measures.

2. Design inclusive and dialogical governance processes

Decision-making should allow genuine deliberation and dialogue. 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.

3. Cultivate competence and capacity among members

Participation in such processes requires skills development. Training and mentoring sessions need to be offered to ensure members can comfortably engage and contribute meaningfully.

4. Balance expertise and democracy

Expertise of professionals must serve, not replace, democratic control. Members need to remain in control to avoid "democracy theater" with pro-forma participation.

5. Foster a culture of care and mutual respect

Dignity is lived through relationships. To enable and support these, the cooperatives need to nurture empathy and solidarity, compassionate (non-violent) communication, and restorative conflict-resolution approaches.

6. Maintain reflexivity and feedback loops

Governance should include mechanisms to continuously question and renew itself. This can be achieved through regular surveys and assemblies evaluating participation quality and ensuring that 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 can be mitigated by implementing term limits and rotation in governance roles, by participatory budgeting and strategic planning, 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.

Next Steps and Recommendations

Members of our cooperatives and the public need to be able to see and feel the difference between a cooperative community and other organizations. The following recommendations may

help (y)our cooperative communities to become more (com-)passionate, caring, and loving communities:

1. Integrate "humanistic, cooperative relationship building" into your community building.[10]

2. Utilize resources from the "Charter for Compassion."[11]

3. Connect and cooperate with community and care-oriented initiatives in your area.

4. Consider offering non-religious pastoral care services and facilitating multi-path conversations and initiatives.

5. Let's be bold in creating "love communities"[12] for the future.

Love will not prevent conflict, but it will offer ways of peaceful and compassionate solutions, 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.

[10] Novković et al., ibid.
[11] Charter For Compassion (2025). Ibid.
[12] Love Community (n.d.) One Community. Available at onecommunityranch.org/love-community.

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