

## **A History of the Calgary Co-operative Memorial Society**

The Cooperative Memorial Society (CMS) has grown from its roots as a cornerstone of the Calgary community to become a trusted resource for individuals and families across Alberta. Offering affordable and dignified end-of-life planning, CMS's history is one of collaboration, resilience, and a steadfast commitment to cooperative principles. Over the decades, the Co-op has expanded its reach and adapted to the evolving needs of its members while staying true to its mission, vision, and core objectives.

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### **Mission, Vision, and Mega Ends**

#### **Mission:**

To reduce the emotional and fiscal stress of funeral planning by providing members:

1. The information, tools, and resources needed for advanced funeral planning.
2. Access to affordable funeral services that uphold the dignity and personhood of the deceased.

#### **Vision:**

We envision an Alberta where all citizens have access to dignified, person-centred funeral services.

#### **Mega Ends Statement:**

The Cooperative Memorial Society exists to ensure that members have access to the resources, support, and guidance they need to plan and prepare for the end of life with dignity, clarity, and peace of mind. By providing education, advocating for consumer rights, and establishing meaningful partnerships, CMS empowers individuals to make informed decisions about end-of-life arrangements and access services at preferred prices from contracted funeral service providers. As we transition to a policy governance model, CMS remains committed to maintaining our fiscal integrity, expanding our reach, and evolving to meet the changing needs of our members and the community.

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### **Founding Years: 1966–1971**

In April 1966, inspired by the growing Memorial Society movement in the United States, a group of Calgary Co-op members sought to create a local organization to provide affordable funeral services. Paul Greig and Irene Stobbe led the effort, supported by Harold Webber, Supervisor of Co-operative Activities for Alberta, who recommended forming a cooperative rather than a society. As a cooperative, the organization could hold property, sign agreements, and operate independently without appointing trustees.

The Calgary and District Funeral Co-operative Ltd. was registered under the **Cooperatives Act of Alberta**, and its first board of directors, chaired by Gil Jamieson, began laying the foundation for success. Early funding of \$600 was provided by Calgary Co-op and the Credit Union Federation of Alberta, and memberships were processed at the Co-op Center Credit Union. Despite initial challenges securing contracts with funeral homes, Bruce Laxdal of Garden Chapel stepped forward with a favorable five-year agreement. This bold move resulted in Garden Chapel's expulsion from the Funeral Directors Association but solidified CMS's ability to offer affordable services.

In 1971, the organization's name was changed to **The Calgary Co-operative Memorial Society Ltd.** to better reflect its mission and cooperative identity. The lifetime membership fee was set at \$20, and the organization continued to grow, maintaining its strong ties to the cooperative movement.

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### **Challenges and Innovations: 1980s**

By the 1980s, CCMS faced difficulties engaging older members to serve on the board. Younger, enthusiastic representatives from other co-ops were invited to join, bringing renewed energy to the organization. In 1980, supplemental bylaws were introduced to allow for corporate memberships and establish an educational trust fund for tax-deductible donations. While the concept of corporate memberships proved too complex to implement, the new bylaws strengthened the cooperative's structure and expanded its potential.

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### **Modernization and Growth: 2000–2017**

The early 2000s marked a period of modernization for CCMS. In 2009, the Canadian Co-operative Association approached CCMS director Terry Geib to explore forming a funeral co-op in Calgary. While a feasibility study confirmed the idea's viability, the board decided not to proceed due to economic conditions and the strength of existing funeral service contracts. However, the business case was shared with other groups, including those in Canada and Ireland, reflecting CMS's collaborative and innovative spirit.

In 2010, CCMS embraced technology by introducing online membership applications and PayPal payments, simplifying the process for new members. The website was revamped in 2011 to improve accessibility and appeal to a broader audience. In 2012, under the leadership of Vice Chair Terry Geib, CMS launched a cloud-based membership system, allowing members to update and store their funeral planning information online for easy access by the funeral home at time of need.

Around this time, CMS informally dropped "**Calgary**" from its name to reflect its growing service area, which now included many communities across southern Alberta. This change

acknowledged the broader scope of the organization's work while maintaining its cooperative identity.

By 2017, CMS had over 45,000 members on record, saving families between \$800 and \$7,500 on funeral expenses depending on the selected plan. Membership fees were increased to \$40 for the first time since the 1970s, ensuring the organization's sustainability while remaining affordable compared to other memorial societies.

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### **Expanding to a Provincial Organization: 2022–2023**

In 2022, CMS took a significant step toward becoming a more inclusive provincial organization by agreeing to absorb the members of the **Memorial Society of Red Deer and District** after its members voted to dissolve their society. This decision was followed in 2023 by a similar vote from the **Memorial Society of Edmonton and Area**, whose members also joined CMS. These transitions marked a pivotal moment in the organization's history, as CMS expanded its reach to serve communities across Alberta. By uniting these memberships, CMS reinforced its role as a trusted resource for affordable and compassionate end-of-life planning throughout the province.

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### **Recent Achievements: 2017–Present**

In 2024, CMS reached another milestone with the appointment of its first Executive Director, signaling a shift toward a more professionalized structure. The organization transitioned from an operations-based board to a policy board, enhancing governance and aligning with best practices.

Today, CMS serves members across Alberta, continuing to grow while staying true to its mission, vision, and cooperative principles. From its humble beginnings in Calgary to its current role as a provincial leader with over 30,000 active members, CMS remains dedicated to offering dignity, compassion, and peace of mind in end-of-life planning.

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This history reflects the perseverance and dedication of CMS's founders, leaders, and members, ensuring its continued relevance and impact for generations to come.

Compiled by Terry Geib