

John Kenny
RI President-elect

Shares Thoughts

with Ashok Mahajan
RI Director

What is the health of Rotary worldwide?

I am very pleased to say that Rotary is in a healthy state. The latest membership figures which I have of March 31, 2008 show an increase in membership from the 1st July starting figure. In India, for example, membership in zone 5 has increased by 3,044 members, an increase of 5.62 percent in the seven-month period, with all districts in the zone except three showing an increase in membership. In Zone 6, there has been an increase of 5,018 members or 8.84 percent with all districts except five showing an increase. At a time when many volunteer service organisations are experiencing a downward trend in membership, Rotary is holding steady and showing gains in some zones.

At the last Council on Legislation, the Board of Directors was asked to re-align the zones to make them roughly equal in size of membership. The Board has done so and, as a result, Asia and Europe will each gain one more zone, and the Americas will lose two zones, reflecting the decline in membership in this region over the past years.

Our Foundation also enjoys good health. Contributions to the Foundation exceeded US \$100 million for the first time last year, and there were record-breaking numbers of new Paul Harris Fellows, Major Donors, and Arch C Klumph Society members—all of which shows that Rotarians clearly recognise the worthiness of their Foundation. These contributions will ensure

that the Foundation can continue to fulfill its mission of advancing world understanding, goodwill, and peace by addressing humanitarian needs.

What are the major challenges Rotarians will have to face in the coming years ?

To deal with world poverty. The current food shortage crisis in many countries provides a stark reminder that although there is an abundance of food in our world, too many people are still dying of starvation. As Rotarians, we must try to ensure that no one tries to sleep at night without having eaten during the day and that everyone has a supply of drinking water readily accessible. There is still much to be done in our world, and it is up to Rotarians to alleviate the plight of those less fortunate than ourselves. Other major problems are increasing populations in some places and the spread of AIDS. I also

believe that water is going to be one of the major issues of the 21st century.

Rotary offers us the resources to address all of these issues. International partnerships and Rotary Foundation grants make it easier for us to provide food and clean water where they are most needed. Working together, we can give people access to medical care and education, which will help to break the cycle of poverty in which so many are trapped from birth.

What can Rotary do to stop membership attrition? Why have we stopped growing?

Rotary can do nothing but Rotarians can do everything. It is up to us to invite worthy members into our organisation. We must do this or run the risk of losing our ability to provide humanitarian service in our communities and abroad. We will no longer be the Rotary that we are proud of. In some parts of the



world, Rotarians have become complacent, sitting in their comfort zone. They are not inviting new members into their clubs, and they are not initiating any new projects. Where Rotary is expanding is where Rotarians are seen to be working in and for their communities, delivering service and connecting with the community. A busy Rotary club is a thriving Rotary club. We must also recruit younger professionals as members, while making our clubs so attractive that they will want to join.

Will Rotary remain relevant two decades from now? Will we be active and strong at then end of our 2nd century ?

None of us have the privilege to see into the future 100 years from now, but I have little doubt that there will still be a place for those who “do good in the world,” which I believe Rotarians are achieving with the service of their commitment. Provided Rotarians continue to conduct projects that are relevant and continue to recruit members who want to serve, Rotary will be active and strong at the end of the 21st century.

To support these efforts, Rotary International has developed a strategic plan that considers long-term goals. The plan has seven priorities: eradicate polio, advance the internal and external recognition and public image of RI; increase Rotary’s capacity to provide service to others; expand membership globally in both numbers and quality; emphasise Rotary’s unique vocational service commitment; optimise the use and development of leadership talents within RI; and fully implement the strategic planning process to ensure continuity and consistency throughout the organisation. By focusing on these priorities, Rotarians can accomplish more, attract highly qualified members and advance Rotary’s stature worldwide.

Could you suggest some ways the cost of Rotary can be reduced?

Very good question. We must remember that all Rotarians are volunteers.

They have a choice as to how they spend their time and talents. We must therefore make our meetings meaningful and not have a proliferation of unnecessary meetings. Rotarians must feel that time spent at and for Rotary is time well spent.

I have seen a tendency in some places to add to the number of events Rotarians are expected to attend. We must be careful that we have the correct balance so that members do not feel stretched in terms of money or time by Rotary demands.

In some places the cost of meals is a factor. RI recently carried out a survey on the cost of membership. I am pleased to say in India that cost represents only a negligible percentage of the cost of membership, whereas in my country it was 58 percent. There is of course nothing in the Constitution of RI to say that you have to sit down to a full meal although this may engender fellowship. Some clubs ask Rotarians to bring their own lunch or serve only snacks. This cuts the cost of the meal but maintains the convivial spirit of eating together.

Why do Rotarians find it so difficult to practice vocational service’s most important constituent – ethics?

I would fervently hope that Rotarians do practice ethical standards. As you know, it is the second Avenue of Service, Vocational Service, that distinguishes Rotary from other service organisations. Through their conduct in their business and private lives, Rotarians should serve as an example to all those in the community. Being a model of ethical behavior is as important as giving service. If we can influence even a small percentage of the people we come into contact with everyday, then we can gradually affect the entire culture.

The world today has grown disgusted with the greed and corruption that have ruined so many lives. As a result, ethical behavior is becoming more appreciated and respected in

the business world. Rotarians should take advantage of this opportunity to be leaders and role models. We should not be reticent about proclaiming our values for they are values worth proclaiming

Should Rotarians be more transparent at all the financial dealings with Rotary? How?

Quite simply, yes. Rotarians should declare any personal interest they have in any matter. They should ensure that all accounts involving projects are monitored carefully and independently audited. Unfortunately, The Rotary Foundation had to suspend services to some districts a short while ago until their financial position could be investigated.

Such incidents violate The Four-Way Test and the spirit of Rotary. The Foundation awards grants from the funds that are so generously contributed by Rotarians. So Rotarians who misuse Foundation funds are actually embezzling from their fellow Rotarians as well as depriving the project’s potential beneficiaries. To prevent such corrupt behavior, The Rotary Foundation Trustees will continue to be vigilant stewards of the funds that Rotarians entrust with them, but it is up to each Rotarian to avoid even the appearance of impropriety in his or her use of Rotary Foundation funds.

In all the “messages” of Rotary profounded by RI Presidents, why is vocational service ignored?

I believe that Vocational Service is at the heart of Rotary. Although I think the second Avenue of Service has been rather neglected in the past, I can give you an assurance that it will get a great deal of attention in 2009–10.

I was very pleased to see that one of the seven priorities in the RI Strategic Plan is to emphasise Rotary’s unique vocational service commitment. The plan asks Rotarians to influence ethical decision-making by encouraging them to join and take

leadership roles in business and vocational associations; find new ways to develop vocational skills of others, especially people without jobs; and develop more vocational forums for learning and information exchange.

It was my intention to establish a Vocational Service Committee in RI, but I am pleased to say that the 2007–08 Board has done just that. In all the addresses I have ever given to Rotarians, I have emphasised the importance of Vocational Service, and I will continue to do so in the coming months and years.

If Rotary has to champion the concept of ethics in all of our deals, what should it do to achieve the desired goal ?

Simply to do what is right, not what is advantageous to you. This may sound easier than it is, of course, but Rotarians have some reference points. The Four-Way Test makes it easy to determine the right course, but first we must put the situation to the test and answer each of its questions honestly. It's not enough to simply display the test on our office wall or on our desk. We must use the test and follow its conclusions even when they are not the answers we were hoping for.

Don't you think the prominence of Vocational Service will enhance the image of Rotary?

Most definitely. I had the pleasure of reading a most excellent interview given by Past President Raja Saboo to Director Ashok in the Rotary News magazine emphasising the importance of Vocational Service. I would urge you all to re-read this. In it, Past President Raja makes the point that Rotary will attract more members if it is seen as an organisation of "successful business and professional people who are ethically clean and have a commitment for social corporate responsibility." By putting vocational service front and centre once again, we are proclaiming to the world that we promote high

ethical standards in business and the professions, and we are clearly demonstrating that success in business and principled behaviour are not mutually exclusive.

What is the future of TRF ?

Judging from recent history, the Foundation faces a strong future. The year 2006–07 broke records for giving to The Rotary Foundation. For the first time in history, contributions to the Annual Programmes Fund exceeded 100 million US dollars. The Foundation received 558 new major gifts of 10,000 US dollars or more.

This year, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation recognised both the stewardship of our Foundation and the commitment of Rotarians

recently adopted a new mission statement that clearly represents our focus. The mission of The Rotary Foundation is to enable Rotarians to advance world understanding, goodwill, and peace through the improvement of health, the support of education, and the alleviation of poverty.

In addition to a new mission, The Rotary Foundation has adopted a Future Vision Plan that will be unfolding in the coming months. This plan will help to focus the humanitarian service efforts of our Foundation in the areas that best conform to our mission. We'll see more emphasis on larger, sustainable projects that will also help to enhance Rotary's public image in much the same way as PolioPlus has. In addition, the Future



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to eradicating polio by giving us a US \$100 million challenge grant. Shortly after we announced this grant, we received a very large Major Gift from a Rotarian in India to help match the Gates challenge.

What we are doing with the money is, of course, even more important than how much we have received. In 2006–07, The Foundation awarded 18 3-H Grants, 2008 Matching Grants, and 780 Ambassadorial Scholarships. In addition, 558 awards were made to Group Study Exchange teams.

All of this is evidence of how The Rotary Foundation is fulfilling its role "to do good in the world." Doing Good in the World continues to be our motto, but the Foundation

Vision Plan will simplify some processes and give districts more control over their DDF.

Has the Four-Way Test become redundant? Why is it displayed with vigour but practiced so seldomly ?

The Four-Way Test is as important now as it was when created in 1932 by Rotarian Herbert J. Taylor, who later became President of Rotary International, and was adopted by RI in 1934. It is important that Rotarians are reminded that one of the pillars of Rotary is the importance of business and professional ethics. This is why we must never neglect the avenue of Vocational Service in our activities.

Can RI institute an “award” on the lines of “Service above Self Award” recognising the honest, the ethical and the “clean” Rotarian?

I would sincerely hope a Rotarian was already doing all of these things. So why should we get a reward for just doing what we should do.

If Rotary has to remain relevant in this century, what changes do you recommend?

Any major changes which would affect the constitution must come before the Council on Legislation. The next Council will be held in 2010. It is important that districts elect knowledgeable representatives to the Council so that the Council can make informed decisions.

Any changes will reflect the changes in society and the perception of Rotary by its members at any given time. On an administrative issue, we must encourage younger members to join, and we must make our clubs attractive so that they wish to join. We must carry out projects which will clearly benefit our communities. We must continue to give service. The need to feed the hungry, educate the illiterate and house the homeless will unfortunately still be required throughout the 21st century. We must continue our service to those less fortunate than ourselves. Finally, we must never forget the core values of Rotary, which are service, fellowship, diversity, integrity and leadership.

What message would you like to give to the Rotarians ?

I would like to thank all Rotarians for giving service to their communities and to those in need throughout the world. I never forget that this is a voluntary organisation. I have always considered that the real work of Rotary is carried out in each Rotary club by members helping those in need and doing so without the thought of reward other than the satisfaction of seeing a job well done.