

moments

TRF Trustee Ashok Mahajan talks to RI Treasurer and Director Michael Colasurdo Sr.

What is the health of Rotary worldwide?

Rotary is doing well but, as in all matters we need to always seek “constant and never-ending improvement.” Unlike other service organisations, Rotary has held its membership relatively even which is a positive sign since many other service organisations have shrunk significantly. That said there is much room for improvement. Rotary is growing in many countries, especially those countries where Rotary is new and far from fully developed but it is having a harder time in countries like the US where it is a mature organisation with widespread membership. Life styles in countries like the United States have limited time available for service organisations that demand regular attendance, and many families have both the husband and wife working to support their families. Organisations like the CEO Roundtable, the Young Presidents Organisation and Regional Chambers of Commerce attract many senior business leaders who are not Rotarians. These organisations have done a good job creating peer organisations focused on business that help its members in building relationships and networking with their peers. Although Rotary has lost some top business leaders in developed countries to these organisations, I believe that it has done a great job in penetrating the established middle class in developed countries and many other countries with a small middle class.

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

There are four challenges facing Rotary that I am concerned about:

- We must keep our promise to the world’s children and finish the job of eradicating polio. To do this we need to partner with community leaders who live where polio is still a problem and build on our partnerships with outside organisations and governments who join us in funding this commitment.
- Approximately, 40 percent of the clubs in the world have less than 25 members. Twenty five percent of the clubs of the world have less than 20 members. Through extension we grow between 500 and 600 clubs per year. We must be concerned with shrinking clubs and consequently shrinking districts. The cost of providing support to the growing number of Rotary clubs with less than 20 members and districts with less than 1,000 members is evident

in the continually increasing budgets. This can only lead to increasing costs for all Rotarians. Though we should establish a minimum annual dues based on the minimum membership needed to start a club (20 members), we must balance that change with more creative ways to help those clubs who want their membership to grow. Under no circumstances should Rotary tell clubs with less than 20 members who are providing useful service to their community that they must have 20 members to be a Rotary club.

- Too many Rotarians do not support our Rotary Foundation with annual contributions. Only 25.4 percent of Rotarians contribute to our Rotary Foundation. We must do a better job of demonstrating the true value of our Foundation to all Rotarians.
- Although Rotary’s senior leadership is dedicated to the success of our organisation, there seems to be a perception among too many Rotarians that Rotary’s leadership has become isolated from the very Districts and Clubs where they are members. These Rotarians believe their senior leadership makes too many decisions that defend the Rotary International brand, its trademarks and policies at the expense of making it harder for Rotary clubs to thrive. Right or wrong, perception is reality and we need to be concerned with such a perception in our strategic planning.

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

Rotary must be transparent at all levels and in all areas. We are not and never will be a secret society.

Can Rotary be accepted by the community if honesty is sacrificed?

Of course not! But my experience across the world is that most Rotarians are honest, caring human beings who do not sacrifice honesty.

How can we be more relevant to the community?

As Rotarians we must see that the vocational service projects, community service projects and international service projects we choose to do are truly needed by the communities we are trying to serve. We should never suggest a project to a community in need unless we have first determined what it is the community truly needs. A project we invest our resources

in should be the project the community truly needs. They should not just be the projects we want to do.

Rotary is unable to utilise fully the talents of Rotary's ambassadorial scholars and GSE team members in promoting Rotary. Any suggestions?

It starts at the club level. Clubs who sponsor GSE team members and ambassadorial scholars need to maintain relationships with them after their experience has ended. We need to invite them into Rotary and invite them to Rotary club and District social events and seminars. When they move out of town the clubs need to help them establish relationships with Rotary clubs wherever they move. We need to enhance Rotary's maintenance of good Foundation Alumni records so we can remain in contact with our investment—former GSE team members and former Foundation scholars.

Any ideas on terrorism control programme?

The only thing that is worse than poverty is to be in a situation where there is no hope. The poor and the destitute in many areas of the world become subjects that terrorists actively recruit to their horrific activities. We need to reach out to the poor and destitute and alleviate poverty with projects that give them hope before terrorists can recruit them.

At the 2005 Zones 31-32 Rotary Institute, Lieutenant Colonel Steve Kiser, a United States Air Force Military Intelligence officer addressed us. The title of his speech was "Terrorism and the Impact of Rotary"

Lieutenant Colonel Kiser observed: "Governments will never stop terrorism by military might alone. All people want is opportunity: the opportunity to feed and educate their children, the chance to give them a better life." He pointed out, "The poor and the desperate have nothing to lose. Rotarians must provide them hope first or terrorists will."

Lieutenant Colonel Kiser's message was that Rotarians and RI's programmes aiding those less fortunate, especially in Muslim countries abroad, was essential to help turn the young away from violence. He said he has seen the benefit of the Rotary Foundation's programmes in action.

He stated, "Rotarians and the programmes of our Foundation are the best hope for a better future for our children and grandchildren. I wear the uniform of the US Military. You wear a Rotary pin. You represent HOPE and the ROAD TO PEACE."

The best way to do that is to support the Rotary Foundation so it has more money to fund grant projects. If every Rotarian gave just \$100 a year to our Rotary Foundation it would have \$90 million more to save and change lives through our Rotary Foundation's grant projects and scholarships. Therefore, the first thing every Rotarian should do is become a sustaining member.

The second thing they should do is see their club actively funds and is actively involved in hands on vocational service projects, community service projects and international service projects. The third thing every Rotarian should do is to look for ways to endow the Peace Fellowship Programme.



With excellent contributions being received in these last years, do you think that new “pilot projects” be started in various countries to address other acute needs of the community?

Yes, contributions have improved, but we need to do so much more! Our emphasis should be on significant, sustainable projects in the six areas of focus.

Rotary’s thrust areas have undergone very little change in the last decade. Do you see any change in the thrust areas?

Rotary’s “thrust areas” are in concert with the “Millennium Development Goals.” The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are eight international development goals that all 192 United Nations member states and at least 23 international organisations have agreed to achieve by the year 2015. They include reducing extreme poverty, reducing child mortality rates, fighting disease epidemics such as AIDS, and developing a global partnership for development. In pilot districts our Rotary Foundation is focusing on six areas of focus. These areas of focus are:

- Peace and conflict prevention/resolution
- Disease prevention and treatment
- Water and sanitation
- Maternal and child health
- Basic education and literacy
- Economic and community development

These six areas of focus fit within the Millennium Goals. I believe when all of Rotary is focused on these six areas of focus we will be much more effective as a major foundation in making the world a better place for our children and grandchildren.

What new areas can be incorporated in the programmes of TRF to make it more relevant?

One of the important requirements for Future Vision and the new Global Grants programme is needs assessment. Through greater emphasis on needs assessment we can be sure our programmes are relevant to the communities being served.

What role has India played in the promotion of Vision of TRF?

Seven Indian districts will be part of the Pilot District Test of Future Vision that will shape our Foundation’s future.

Will the Rotary Foundation evolve new strategies to promote peace?

That is up to Rotarians. Under Future Vision clubs and districts have far more choice and control. With choice comes diversity. I am confident this diversity will lead to new strategies to make peace a reality for our children and grandchildren.

Will TRF spend more than it gets to fulfill its programmes? The interest earned out of the contribution can, perhaps, support some projects of vital concern.

That depends on the return earned by the Foundation’s investments. I suspect because of the careful investments that will be made during the two year holding period before donations are spent, in most years we will spend more on programmes

than we raised two years earlier. However, as we have learned from painful experience that will not always be true.

Woman empowerment is the need of the decade and next. Will TRF enter into some programme promoting woman empowerment?

I certainly hope so. The choice is yours and mine. Because Rotarians choose and control the programmes they are involved with, the choice is up to each Rotarian and each Rotary club. Certainly Rotary’s leadership is encouraging this.

Young men and women who go as ambassadorial scholars or GSE team members are from a relatively affluent group and on their return are often a total loss to Rotary . Will TRF support local youth upliftment programmes for the poor youth?

Again, the beauty of Rotary is that the choice is yours and mine. The direction of our Rotary Foundation is up to the clubs and Rotarians. They choose how our Foundation’s funds are spent. The best example of this is the dramatic growth in demand for matching grants.

Will we conquer polio in the next 3 years?

We all certainly hope so. It is the Rotarians in India, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Nigeria who will answer that question by their efforts with the support of their partners, the Rotary world and Rotary’s partners. The future of Polio Eradication is in their hands.

Is illiteracy the biggest stumbling block in the path of progress and prosperity?

Illiteracy is a major stumbling block. However I believe Rotary’s focus should be on all six areas of focus.

Why do Rotarians find it so difficult to practice Vocational Services’ most important constituent – Ethics ?

Vocational Service and its importance are not fully understood by most Rotarians. That’s our fault as senior Rotary leaders. We must do a better job helping Rotarians better understand vocational service and its importance. However, as I said earlier I do not agree that most of our 1.2 million Rotarians find it difficult to practice ethics. I believe, by far most Rotarians are very ethical.

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

Each President focuses on the issues they believe to be most important. Some have indeed emphasised ethics and vocational service. Vocational service is a matter of educating club Rotarians and their leaders. We must do a better job of educating the typical club Rotarian and their leaders on the importance of Vocational Service.

What is your message to Rotarians?

The key to Rotary’s future success is getting younger, being flexible and strengthening each and every Rotary club. It is my belief that Rotary’s senior leaders have not forgotten and in the future must never forget that our job is to create an environment that provides the tools which allow Rotary clubs to succeed!