



RI PRESIDENT-ELECT'S THEME ADDRESS TO THE 2017 INTERNATIONAL ASSEMBLY

Ian H.S. Riseley
16 January 2017

Good morning!

I hope you enjoyed the festivities last night. Did you have a good night's sleep? Are you ready to get to work? And how do you like the theme tie?

It's great to be able to formally welcome you, the 2017-18 class of Rotary International district governors, to this International Assembly.

Like probably every president-elect before me, standing here in front of you, I am reminded of my own International Assembly, almost 20 years ago, just up the road here in Anaheim.

In the months leading up to that assembly, the governor of my district told me in no uncertain terms that my International Assembly was going to be a life-changing experience, the greatest thing that had ever happened to me in Rotary. He said this so often that I got a bit tired of it, to be honest. I felt that an International Assembly should be heaps of fun, a lot of hard work, and perhaps something of an eye-opener. But I did not expect it to change my life.

It may shock you all to hear that in fact, I was right. My International Assembly did not change my life.

It was great fun. We worked incredibly hard, learned a heck of a lot, and went home with our heads swimming with new information. I made friends that have lasted ever since, including our fearless moderator here, Stuart Heal.

It was a wonderful experience.

It was not life-changing.

But the year that followed was.

Not seven days in a hotel at the International Assembly with my fellow DGsE, but 365 days with my fellow Rotarians. Seeing the kind of difference that Rotary service could make, and knowing that if I did my job well, my district could, and would, change lives.

You and I, we are beginning something tremendous together. We are beginning an

experience that will change all of our lives, in ways great and small — and that will also change the lives of countless others we don't know, and may never meet.

But in fact, it is what we all do after we leave here that makes the real difference.

We are here this week to help ensure that the Rotary we all value so deeply continues to serve and to grow, not just through this year, or even through our lifetimes, but beyond.

We are here to help maintain and build a Rotary that is sustainable, and that keeps sustainability and continuity at the heart of its focus and its planning from now on.

And that is why all of us here must see the year ahead not just as our year of leadership, but as Rotary's year. Not the year that Rotary has given us to shine, but the year that we will give to Rotary, so that its light will shine ever brighter.

Our service will be guided, as it should be, by the three strategic priorities our Rotary International Board has set for all of Rotary in our current strategic plan:

- to support and strengthen our clubs
- to focus and increase our humanitarian service
- and to enhance Rotary's public image and awareness

So how do we support and strengthen our clubs? We start by giving them the tools to be successful.

Thanks in part to the recently approved dues increase, we are now undertaking significant changes that will enable us to improve support for our clubs by a greatly enhanced array of online tools. In particular, a refreshed Rotary.org, a simplified Rotary Foundation grant process, an improved My Rotary experience, and a rebuilt and far more effective Rotary Club Central, which will be faster, easier to use, mobile-friendly, and an essential tool for every club. This is an important use of Rotary's valuable resources.

Now, when we look at the specific challenges in our clubs, which we must help them to address, two of them stand out to me. One is the gender balance in our membership. The other is the average age of Rotarians.

It has been 28 years since our Council on Legislation voted to admit women to membership in Rotary. Yet the percentage of women serving in our clubs is only just over 20 percent — up from about 13 percent 10 years ago. At that rate, it will take us another three decades to get to where we should be: gender parity, with as many women members in Rotary clubs as men.

Three decades is far too long to wait to achieve a Rotary that reflects the world in which we live. We need to make it a priority now.

Of this class of 539 incoming district governors, we have 103 women. And you are fabulous examples of the women we need in Rotary — women as leaders who will help Rotary connect with, and represent, and better serve, all of the members of all our communities. We need more like you.

The second critical challenge in our member demographics is our age. Paul Harris was

36 years of age when he called that first Rotary meeting together in Chicago in 1905. Today, only 5 percent of our reported membership is under the age of 40. Just 5 percent. The great majority of members are over 60. And that is based on age reporting that covers only half our membership base — it doesn't even include the people who don't want to tell us how old they are.

Think about that for just a moment. Now consider what Rotary stands to look like 10 or 20 years from now, if we don't get very serious, very soon, about bringing in younger members. It is imperative that we find new and better ways to consistently attract and engage younger members, so that we are constantly creating new generations of members and leaders. This is essential for our organization to flourish.

What about our second strategic priority of focusing and increasing our humanitarian service?

We have six areas of focus in Rotary. In all of them, one essential element is sustainability. We don't dig wells and walk away: We make sure communities can maintain and repair those wells. If we build a clinic, we make sure that clinic has a way to keep running, without ongoing support from us. And when it comes to polio, we aren't just working to contain it; we're working to end it.

Eradicating polio is the ultimate in sustainable service. It is an investment that will yield not just a long-lasting but a permanent benefit, on a global scale.

Of course polio is unique in Rotary's history. But it has shown us what we are capable of achieving. And it should be a model for all of our service — a global reminder that the best possible way to increase the good that we do is to do it sustainably and often in partnership with others.

Our third priority is enhancing public image and awareness, which very naturally goes hand in hand with the first two goals. We'll be previewing our new public image campaign here this week, talking about the importance of communicating a consistent brand, and about ways to tell our Rotary story more effectively. When we're better able to communicate who we are in Rotary, what we stand for, and what we do, we're much more likely to attract new members who will fit into our organization and new partners who will help us leverage our service to achieve even more.

Connecting all of those priorities is that one word: sustainability.

Yet there is another aspect of sustainability that underpins all of that, but which is too little talked about in Rotary, and which we can no longer put aside as not our responsibility.

That is sustainability of our planet.

In 1990, then-RI President Paulo Costa called upon all Rotarians to preserve planet Earth. Through that theme, he hoped to awaken Rotary's ecological conscience. By committing to planet Earth, he said, we sealed our commitment to the future.

Today, environmental degradation and climate change threaten us all. They are having a disproportionate impact on those who are most vulnerable, those to whom Rotary has

the greatest responsibility. Yet environmental issues barely register on the Rotary agenda.

The time is long past when environmental sustainability can be dismissed as not Rotary's concern. It is, and must be, everyone's concern.

And so I am asking every Rotary club to plant at least one tree for each member, sometime between the beginning of the Rotary year and Earth Day, which is 22 April 2018. It is my hope that the result of that effort will be far greater than the environmental benefit that those 1.2 million new trees will bring, which is itself most worthwhile. I believe the greater result will be a Rotary that recognizes our responsibility, not only to the people on our planet — but to the planet itself on which we all live and on which we all depend. This can be a true feature of Rotary in 2017-18.

I started out today talking about life-changing experiences in Rotary. And I want to finish by telling you about a life-changing experience that I had — one that has shaped my service, and my commitment to Rotary, ever since.

It was nearly 31 years ago, on 26 April 1986, and I remember the date because it was my 39th birthday, when the No. 4 reactor at the Chernobyl nuclear power plant failed. We all know what enormous problems that caused, in Ukraine, in neighboring Belarus, and indeed all over Europe.

For some years after, the Australian government ran a program to help the children of Chernobyl, by bringing planeloads over to Australia for short holidays in the sunshine and clean air. My Rotary club offered to look after a busload of them for a weekend at the beach in Sandringham, where there happened to also be a really fantastic playground my club had built some years before.

We had a great time with those kids, who were all a bit thinner and paler than they should have been. And the week after they left, on the front page of our local newspaper, was a photograph of one little girl, hanging upside down by her knees on our Rotary playground — a huge smile on her face, her too-thin hair blowing in the breeze. Next to her, embedded in a wooden support, was a Rotary wheel.

Looking at that picture — at that little girl, at our Rotary wheel — that was the moment I came to realize the power of Rotary that we all experience, every single day: the power to make a difference for those who need us.

Making a difference is an expression you hear all the time about Rotary, the opportunities that we have and the things that we do.

And that is why we are all here, at this assembly. To make a difference: to our world, to our communities, and in the lives of others. And in 2017-18, that will not only be our goal, but our theme — *Rotary: Making a Difference*.

What kind of a difference each club and each Rotarian chooses to make will always be their own decision. But we are united in our organization and its common principles: our insistence on ethics and our commitment to Service Above Self.

As an individual, what could I have done, what could any of us have done, to help those

children from Chernobyl? We wouldn't even have known where to start. But through Rotary, even in my small club in Sandringham, we were able to make a real difference.

In Rotary, we know that we can do more together than we could ever hope to do alone. It is the principle on which our service is based, and it is true at every level of Rotary. All of us here this week are, and must be, a team, as I mentioned last night.

We are united in our common goals of moving our organization forward and ensuring its lasting future. I ask you to keep that spirit of teamwork and cooperation always in your minds and to take it back with you to your districts.

Let me emphasize again that the year ahead of us all is not just our year of leadership. Our job is to make it Rotary's year to shine. It is the year all of us have committed to dedicate to service through Rotary. It is Rotary making a difference by building stronger and more active clubs that serve in better and more lasting ways. It is believing in a Rotary that is recognized for the good work it does — a Rotary that will continue to grow, to endure, to go from strength to strength — making a difference to our communities, our countries, and our world.

That is what we will achieve together next year. *Rotary: Making a Difference.*