

Building Communities — Bridging Continents

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Many of you will recognize that familiar song as “California, Here I Come.” It is a great, old song, and it reflects that we have been thinking about, and dreaming about, this meeting for the last year. Now the time is here, and it is no longer “California, Here I Come.” It is now “California, We Are Here”! The new team of Rotary leaders has arrived, and we are ready to go!

The Rotary network of volunteer talent is amazing. The music as I came on stage was recorded in my small town of Kirksville by 16 college students, at Truman State University, for use in promoting the Rotary convention in Los Angeles. The music was arranged, and the band was conducted, by a member of my Rotary club, Randy Smith. It was an impressive display of talent, and an example of Service Above Self, for both Randy and the students.

And that same old song that you are hearing now is being played by Mary Sallee, who is donating her time and talent for this entire week. Music helps to lift the human spirit, and we will utilize Mary’s talent frequently this week to enhance the assembly. Mary is a Rotarian from the state of Oklahoma, USA, and she is a former Rotary Scholar who studied music in Vienna during her scholarship year. Please welcome another product of The Rotary Foundation, Mary Sallee!

We have a lot to talk about, so let’s start with something that is normally of high interest to incoming district governors, which is the theme blazers for next year. Some of you may think that Paul Harris started the theme jackets but, actually, their entry into Rotary was only 25 years ago.

The theme blazers started in 1984-85, when Carlos Canseco was the RI president, and the governor in my district that year, Jim Fischer, was instrumental in starting and maintaining the tradition. Jim and his brother owned a sporting goods store in the St. Louis area, and when his classmates expressed an interest in acquiring some brightly colored jackets to identify one another at Rotary conventions, Jim secured a large number of bright yellow blazers for his fellow governors. The yellow jackets — or the Jell-O jackets, as they were frequently called — were an instant success, and they were highly visible at the 1985 Rotary convention in Kansas City.

The jackets were so popular that the 1986-87 RI president, M.A.T. Caparas, asked Jim to provide a supply of Harvard crimson-colored blazers for sale at the 1986 International Assembly in Nashville. The blazers were a big hit, and as the succeeding presidents selected their colors from year to year, Jim provided the blazers for many years. The rest is history, but let’s pause for a moment and express our appreciation to two of my Rotary heroes, who turned the theme blazers into a Rotary tradition. Please recognize Past District Governor Jim Fischer from the St. Louis area and Past RI President M.A.T. Caparas from the Philippines!

The color is actually anticlimactic this year, since I announced the burgundy color at the district governors-nominee meeting in Birmingham. As you probably know, we were able to cut the price in half this year by making the blazers available for advance purchase. Although the savings have been significant, there is a more important lesson to be learned. An established practice was reviewed and examined, and a better method was found. That example should encourage us to look for other traditional procedures we have in Rotary, including those in our clubs and districts, that are no longer “best practices.” The moral of the story is that we need to look at all of our traditional practices, and if there are clearly better ways to do things, then we need to start some new traditions.

Now let us now turn our attention to a second item of special interest for incoming district governors: the RI theme for next year. I have devoted much thought to the selection of an appropriate theme, and during the process, I reviewed and categorized all of the past RI themes. The first theme listed in the current *Official Directory* was for the 1949-50 Rotary year, and like the other early themes, it was a lengthy list of objectives. The themes, as we know them today, began to emerge in the 1950s with three shorter versions: *Rotary Is Hope in Action. Develop Our Resources. Help Shape the Future.*

Among the more modern themes, some have been long: *Act with Integrity, Serve with Love, Work for Peace. Show Rotary Cares for Your Community, for Our World, for Its People. ACT — Aim for Action, Communicate for Understanding, Test for Leadership.* And some have been short: *Participate! Reach Out. Rotary Shares.*

Some of the themes have started with verbs and called for action: *Be a Friend. Lend a Hand. Lead the Way.* And others have been statements to emphasize a point: *You Are the Key. Mankind Is Our Business. Real Happiness Is Helping Others.* Sixteen of the themes have included the word *Rotary*: *Live Rotary. Enjoy Rotary. Rotary Shares. Celebrate Rotary. Rotary Brings Hope.*

Three of the themes have included the word *service*: *Service Above Self. Let Service Light the Way. Rotarians — United in Service — Dedicated to Peace.* And three of the themes have included the words *bridge* or *bridges*: *Bridge the Gaps. Vitalize! Personalize! Build Bridges of Friendship. Mankind Is One — Build Bridges of Friendship throughout the World.*

My review of the Rotary themes revealed an additional aspect that is significant. Most of the themes speak only to Rotarians, but a few seek to explain Rotary to non-Rotarians. The possibility of a dual purpose caused me to think about the admonition of Rotary's super salesman, Frank Devlyn, that all of us need to develop an elevator speech in which we can sell the concept of Rotary to non-Rotarians between the time an elevator door closes on one floor and the time it opens on a different floor. As a result, I decided to search for a briefly stated theme that would fulfill two objectives: the first to explain Rotary to non-Rotarians, and the second to validate our work for Rotarians.

In my search for the right words, I reviewed the four Avenues of Service and noted that Club Service and Vocational Service both help us to enjoy life and to be good citizens. Community Service and Vocational Service combine to make our local communities better places for us to live and work. International Service permits us to partner with clubs in other countries and on different continents to make the world a better place to live, with an improved opportunity for world understanding, goodwill, and peace. So I wrestled with the question of how to best express the unique contribution of Rotarians, both locally and globally.

I next reviewed the advice of Jim Collins in his bestselling book *Good to Great* for nonprofit organizations. His advice is to review the following three questions to determine the right direction for the future: 1) What are your members passionate about? 2) What is your organization the best in the world at doing? 3) What drives your resources?

We were guided by all three of those questions in designing the Future Vision Plan for The Rotary Foundation, and I used them again to shape my thinking about the right words to describe the passion, creativity, and generosity of Rotarians. So let's pause for a moment. Now think to yourself about the best three or four words to describe Rotary. Words that will both give outsiders a glimpse of our purpose and make our Rotarians proud of their membership!

As we seek the right words, it is important to remember that Rotary is a "spirit of service" as well as an organization of Rotary clubs, and that we need to share our core values of service, fellowship, diversity, integrity, and leadership with other people and organizations. So what are the magical words that can capture the essence of Rotary?

I considered many words and phrases after President John Kenny announced his thoughtful theme in this very room last year, and the words I have selected to describe Rotary's current mission and to highlight our achievements are what we do best: *Building Communities — Bridging Continents*.

I hope you agree that these four words aptly reflect who we are and what we do as Rotarians. We are a unique and a premier organization, certainly one of the best in the world. We build the spirit and resources of our local communities in an important way, which was beautifully summarized by the governor of my district last year, Elizabeth Usovicz: "When a positive spirit comes alive in our clubs, we inspire our communities. And when our communities are inspired by our service and presence, we inspire new members. It's a powerful cycle."

She was right when she said that we inspire both our clubs and our communities when we truly capture the spirit of Rotary service. Although most of us would agree that Rotary is the best in the world at building communities, there are members of other organizations who may not concede the point. However, when we talk about bridging continents, there are only a few who may not agree that Rotary is the best in the world at linking people of goodwill around the globe and then gaining their cooperation and support to make the world a much better place to live and work. Ed Cadman was right when he said, "Rotary is unity without uniformity." That unity of purpose makes us the best organization in the world. We are indeed fortunate to be Rotarians!

As we celebrate the achievements of our clubs and districts, and the resounding success of Rotary, we need to pause and remember that we owe a great debt for the legacy left to us by countless Rotarians who have labored in the past to raise Rotary to its current place on the world stage. We stand on their shoulders, and this meeting provides an opportunity to meet the past presidents and the other past officers who have led the way for Rotary during the 50 years I have been attending Rotary meetings.

Yes, I am proud to say that I have 50 years of Rotary experience, because I was a Rotary Scholar. My hometown club in Unionville, Missouri, wisely and generously invited me to attend all of its meetings, at the club's expense, from the time I was selected as a scholar until I left for my year of study in South Africa. I was the first student from my small town to study abroad, and it would never have happened without Rotary.

Now stop to think that almost 50,000 other scholars have enjoyed the same opportunity and that 60,000 Group Study Exchange team members have spent time in countries and continents other than their own. Add to that the more than 100,000 Rotary Youth Exchange students who have lived with host parents in countries and continents far from their homelands. And then think about the fact that Rotary has been the catalyst to reduce the number of paralytic polio cases in the world from 500,000 in 1979 to less than 2,000 cases last year — a 99.9 percent reduction — and that we are about to eradicate one of the most dreaded diseases in the history of the world. And then remember the estimate that Rotary clubs and their members spent about 10 times more on local community projects than they contribute to The Rotary Foundation each year, which places the annual expenditures for community service projects in the billion-dollar range.

With this amazing record, is there any doubt this a wonderful time to be a Rotarian? In fact, can you think of any other organization in which you could make better use of your time and talents to make the world a truly better place? But as we reflect upon our mutual pride in Rotary, be aware of a major shift in your responsibilities. You are about to become the new class of Rotary governors, and in just five months, it will be our mutual responsibility not only to maintain Rotary as a premier organization but to move it to an even higher level. Much of our success will be dependent on the time, talent, and persistence that each of you is willing to commit as a friend, counselor, and cheerleader for the clubs in your district. Rotary needs the full commitment of each and every district governor-elect in this room, because a convoy can only move

at the speed of the slowest ship! Please don't fall behind and thereby slow the Rotary convoy as we move into the new century of service for Rotary International, which originated 100 years ago with the first convention of Rotary clubs in August of 1910!

If all of us in this room are willing to be the leaders we have the ability to be, is there any doubt the best days of Rotary are still ahead? We can do it, if we are willing to pay the price with our time and sweat! Our membership of 1.2 million members is relatively small in numbers, when we consider the global population of six billion. But bear in mind the priceless advice of noted anthropologist Margaret Mead: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has."

Yes, we have changed the world, and will continue to change it, in a positive way! Can we do it even better in these financially troubled times? Yes, we can do it! Yes, we will do it — together! The formula is simple. For us to succeed next year, all we need to do is to focus our best efforts on encouraging our clubs and districts to do what Rotarians are passionate about, and what Rotarians are the best in the world at doing, which is *Building Communities — Bridging Continents!*