



GENERAL SECRETARY'S REMARKS

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General Secretary
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Good afternoon. Good afternoon, everyone.

You know, each year the International Assembly helps prepare a new generation of Rotary leaders for the challenges our organization will face. But as President-elect Mario pointed out this morning, some of those challenges, especially as they relate to membership, have been the same for a very, very long time.

To address these challenges, and for Rotary to thrive, we must be bold, we must be innovative, and, I would argue, we must be revolutionary. This means forming new, innovative clubs different from our traditional clubs. But it also means making changes to existing clubs so they seem new and exciting. Because retaining our current members is just as important as attracting new ones. These are the keys to growing our organization and addressing our membership challenges.

It also means finding new ways to engage people in Rotary, whether that's through events, programs, or service opportunities. In fact, our vision statement references uniting not just our members, but uniting people to take action, because all of our participants, such as alumni and community partners, contribute to our success.

Now, before I talk about your responsibility to form new clubs and to lead club presidents toward positive change, I want to talk about something everyone who has ever run a business should understand well: knowing your customers.

For example, if you wanted to open a new coffee shop, you could just look for an available storefront, pay the rent, purchase the equipment, find the staff, and open your doors. And maybe, maybe, it would be a success. But you'd have a much greater chance of success if you understood the community: How much foot traffic is there on the street? How many competitors are there? Is it a coffee-drinking community, or do people prefer tea?

A smart business owner would do the research, find the right location and tailor a menu that appeals to potential customers, and form relationships with neighboring businesses so they might push their customers your way.

Our Rotary clubs need to do the same. We need to recognize that we are offering a product to the marketplace, and that product is the club experience. We pay for that product with our time and our money. And that product needs to offer a value

proposition to the people we want to attract to our organization. In many parts of the world, and in too many of our clubs, it no longer does.

Now, an important part of what we are offering is the service we do in our communities and the impact we are making. So let me share a story about my district. I belong to the Rotary Club of Kyiv, Ukraine, District 2232. The war in Ukraine has brought unimaginable hardship to the Rotarians in that country, but it has also revealed the strength and resilience of Ukrainian Rotary members.

Despite the ongoing conflict, the clubs have not only continued to operate, but they have also thrived. How? By deepening their connection to the country and to their communities. Clubs in Ukraine have worked to understand the evolving needs of a community under siege. Whether it's providing humanitarian aid, supporting displaced families, or partnering with local leaders to strengthen resilience, clubs in Ukraine have become a trusted partner in the country's adaptation and survival.

And this commitment has not gone unnoticed. Even in the midst of war, membership in Ukraine has increased by 50%, attracting individuals inspired by the work Rotary is doing and eager to contribute. And the generosity of Rotary members worldwide who have contributed an astounding US\$80 million to relief efforts since the war started has made a significant impact as well.

So, why am I specifically calling out Ukraine? Because the lesson here is clear, and it is relevant to all of our communities. When we invest in truly understanding our communities — listening to their needs, partnering with their leaders, and serving with empathy — we create an environment where people naturally want to join us and naturally want to buy our product, which again is the club experience.

Now, we all know that Rotary is not a one-size-fits-all organization, nor should it be. We need to engage our members and other participants in whatever way appeals to them most, whether that is solving problems close to home or partnering to help others halfway around the globe. And to do this effectively, Rotary needs to follow the wisdom of Paul Harris, who famously said Rotary must be evolutionary at all times and revolutionary at times.

This is one of those times. And the revolution must start at the club level — particularly for those that are struggling. In too many parts of the world, the traditional club model, the very foundation of Rotary, has not kept pace with changing lifestyles, priorities, and expectations. But this revolution must also include a focus on engagement, service, and impact.

Now, let me share with you a startling fact from our own research. We surveyed people who have engaged with Rotary in a meaningful way, and we found that a majority of those surveyed are not interested in joining a club. These are people who think of us very positively and have seen the good work we do. But something is still holding them back from joining a club.

And our research also found that only 5% — 5% — of people not already in a service organization are interested in joining one. And that means two things: First, we need to have the best possible model to attract that 5%, so we can get to them first. Now, 5% of the global population may not seem like a very large number, but it's actually 400 million people. We need to identify where they are and appeal to them most strongly. And second, we need to make Rotary more broadly appealing to people who may not fully understand all we have to offer.

So, here's something we can use your help with. When you make club visits and speak to club presidents, make sure that they understand that there is a great deal of flexibility in Rotary policies. There is no mandate to meet every week or to meet at the same time or to stick to the same format. Our traditions are important. But we own our traditions; they don't own us.

And so, Rotary is giving clubs permission to be innovative and to think out of the box. And you must help spread that word. Of course, there are some things about Rotary that can never change: our values, our commitment to service, fellowship, and our belief in The Four-Way Test. And if the traditional model is working for a club, fine. But if not, that club has a mandate to change.

So, let's look at some new approaches. Some clubs are experimenting with service-only meetings, others are focused on networking, and others rotate locations. Some clubs liked the experience of online meetings during the pandemic and became hybrid, creating a mix of in-person and virtual meetings. Virtual elements are helping clubs engage with people across the globe, both members and nonmembers. And they can enhance service projects just as much as in-person meetings.

Rotary members are also using AI right now to assist with their community assessments, brainstorm about service project delivery, and even to assist with translation efforts in clubs with multilingual needs. And for all of you on your phones right now, searching for that Rotary coffee shop? That coffee shop doesn't exist, and the visuals you saw were generated by AI.

So, innovation is all around us. And if clubs need more ideas about how to innovate, the Rotary Action Plan is an incredible resource to help them reimagine the experiences they are providing. And so, my call to action to you is to be agents of change by promoting these innovations and, most importantly, by letting club presidents know that it's time to be revolutionary. Because each and every one of you is an integral part of that revolution as well.

Now, as a district governor, one of your principal responsibilities is to charter new clubs. And there are many different types of clubs at your disposal. Here are just a few examples: Our data tells us that there's growing interest in cause-based clubs. In the last few years, we've seen cause-based clubs thriving in regions as diverse as India, Africa, and Europe. In addition, there are e-clubs, which open participation to the entire world. President-elect Mario mentioned satellite clubs in his speech. And finally, there are the

so-called impact or companion clubs. As their name suggests, they are companions to existing, traditional clubs. Members pay full dues to the existing, traditional club — they just aren't required to attend meetings. They just do the service.

These impact or companion clubs have become a magnet for young professionals interested in weekend service projects, and they're thriving. Attrition is roughly half — half — of that of traditional clubs.

Now, as I said earlier, chartering new clubs is the responsibility of district governors. And in the last five years, roughly 20% — 20% — of all districts have not chartered any. Not one club. Last year, less than half — half — of districts formed new clubs.

This has to change, because our greatest growth opportunities come from people looking for something different. And this change must start with each and every one of you. Just think, if every district started five new Rotary clubs, that's 100 new Rotary members in every district. That's 52,000 new members every year. And if we work to retain the current and new members we have, the growth in our organization would be remarkable.

And so let me close by returning to a subject we don't talk about enough, and with a call to action that combines our dedication to service with the need to focus on membership growth and retention. I talked earlier about the 400 million people who are out there but who are not so easy to identify. Our experience shows that the best way to reach them is by being relevant in your community.

In India, Rotary made a monumental effort to rid that country of polio — something many people thought would be impossible. That effort is still remembered well all throughout India, and we continue to be rewarded with strong membership growth.

All across Africa, we are seeing something very similar. Rotary not only helped eradicate polio from the continent, but we left behind public health resources to fight Ebola and other deadly diseases. Our continued commitment to addressing serious issues facing nations like Zambia and Egypt is noticed and rewarded, and we are seeing strong membership growth in Africa.

This is true in every place where Rotary is deeply engaged in creating positive change. Wherever Rotary identifies and addresses the greatest challenges, we grow.

So, let's be revolutionary. So that Rotary truly lives up to its promise as an organization that you join to connect, to grow, and to do good.

Let's reinvent Rotary from within, expand our clubs in ways that appeal to the people we most need to attract. Let's offer an experience and a product that ensures that our current and new members stay. Let's create new and innovative club models.

And let's be relevant in our communities so that Rotary is known as a force to *Unite for Good*, everywhere and to everyone.

Thank you, and enjoy the assembly.