



## THE 2020-21 PRESIDENTIAL THEME: ROTARY OPENS OPPORTUNITIES

Holger Knaack  
Rotary International President-elect  
20 January 2020

Fourteen years ago, Rotary held its first International Assembly here in San Diego. And I was sitting right where you are — as a district governor-elect. I was nervous then about the responsibilities ahead of me and the challenges of leadership.

Now, here we are in 2020, at the final International Assembly to be held here in San Diego — and I am still somewhat nervous. The responsibilities are larger for me this time. But so are the possibilities. I am so excited to share with you all the opportunities that lie in front of us.

At home, you are part of a team that works together year to year, making sure that your district's most important work does not end with a new year of leadership, but continues with greater emphasis. I am also part of a team.

I will be proud to continue President Mark Maloney's strong commitment to growing Rotary. However, I will not be asking you to grow by specific numbers, for a very simple reason — every time that we have asked to grow by specific numbers, we have failed. Instead of focusing on numbers, I want you to think about how we can grow Rotary organically and sustainably. How can we keep our current members and win new members who fit our clubs?

Then, how can we make our organization stronger to face the challenges before us? We must rise to this incredible moment — when we are recognized worldwide for our efforts to end polio — and fix our roof while the sun is shining.

In many ways, Rotary is in wonderful shape. We are financially strong. Still. The Rotary Foundation is recognized as one of the world's best charities. Our global grants continue to grow, and we become a more internationally focused organization every year.

We are also evolving in interesting ways. There are now more Asian Rotarians than North American. But there are risks if current trends continue. Especially in areas where we see an aging population, Rotary is declining and over-aged.

We cannot stand still and be satisfied with everything we have done. The digital revolution has affected us much harder than we anticipated. Others have faced this challenge before us and fared poorly.

I had the opportunity to speak recently to Rotarians in Rochester, New York. A former executive at Kodak was in attendance. He told me that they all knew that photography would make the transition to digital eventually. They just never expected it to happen so fast. They went from being the worldwide leader in their field to a company in bankruptcy in just a handful of years.

Time will not slow down for us.

But we will not let rapid change defeat us. We will capture this moment to grow Rotary, making it stronger, more adaptable, and even more aligned with our core values.

In Germany, we see Rotary as a community of shared values and personal integrity. Friendship and networking draw people to Rotary. Because of that, we have strong clubs, from which we generate strength for our service.

The Four-Way Test helps us make objective decisions. It is all about self-reflection. Sometimes you don't even know if what you see with your own eyes is true. But The Four-Way Test allows us to ask ourselves: Am I being honest? And am I doing the right thing? That is important. And if we are being completely honest with ourselves, when we look ahead, do we think Rotary is doing enough to face the challenges of the future?

Rotary has to change and will change. And even if some fellow Rotarians will complain that it does not look like their old Rotary, we have to change. As Paul Harris said, we have to be revolutionary from time to time. And now is the time to be revolutionary. One way that we will do this is by creating new club models and rethinking what it means to be in Rotary. Young people should be the architects of these new clubs.

For many younger people, sitting down for a meal together is not the best way to meet. Just because we have held meetings this way for over 100 years doesn't mean it is the only way. [My partner] Susanne's club, for example, is a local e-club. They meet online once a week, communicating on a smartphone app, and they meet in person once a month.

Susanne's club ranges in age from 27 to 70. I love this kind of diversity of generations in our Rotary clubs. That is the ideal — a multi-generation club. Some clubs will succeed in doing this, but only if they meet the needs of younger generations.

We have to be open to new approaches — and creating unique new clubs for younger people is just part of the solution. You have the power to implement them. It will be up to you to make it work. Forming new Rotary clubs is the distinct responsibility of the district governor. Rotary International has already embraced change. Now it is up to you to make these new clubs a reality.

And by the way, one way that we can listen to younger generations and make existing club membership more appealing to them is to focus more on the environment. Recent disasters — such as the bush fires in Australia — underscore the importance of taking strong action. Our last three presidents made a strong case for Rotary doing more to preserve the environment. There is much we can do ourselves — cutting down on our use of plastic, not overly cooling or heating our homes and offices, not driving too fast on the German autobahn. We are already building environmental protection and

sustainability into our service projects, but we have to make these issues more of a priority. Younger people are waiting for us to inspire them to action.

Young people today enjoy service and want to be active in it. We see this in Rotaract — and Rotaractors are now like us. We are all part of Rotary International. We have done away with the artificial age limit. Let Rotaractors decide what kind of Rotary experience works best for them. And anyone who has worked with Rotaractors knows that these young people are bright, energetic, and they get things done! Rotaractors are faster, more effective, and impatient. Their impatience is a virtue. They want to see results now and they will do the necessary work to get it done right away!

Their impatience and persistence make an impact. Nine years ago, Rotarians had an idea for a new project with the Berlin zoo that, one weekend a year, puts on an amazing show for children that encourages exercise, reading, and healthy eating. While Rotary clubs were still thinking and discussing the project, Rotaractors just decided to start it. And now, all 36 Berlin Rotary and Rotaract clubs take part and make thousands of underprivileged children happy.

So let's take up the challenge and open the doors of Rotary for Rotaractors and young professionals.

But let us also remember that there is no wrong age to become a Rotarian. Every age is welcome; every age has something important to contribute. As we reach out to young Rotarians, we will not leave others behind.

But what about existing clubs? Some parts of the world are already doing a good job with member engagement and retention, while other parts of the world need to do better. To do that, we are going to have to choose new members carefully and ensure that they are the right fit for the right club. We need to make sure that the club meets their expectations. Take it seriously and take your time — you are choosing new friends for life.

We need to stop thinking of new members as people we can mark down as statistics and then forget about. People who leave Rotary talk, and others listen. That affects our image. We want every new Rotarian to be a lifelong Rotarian — a friend engaged in Rotary.

Every new member changes us a little bit. That person brings a new perspective, new experiences. We need to embrace this constant renewal. We will grow stronger as we learn from new members and take their experience and knowledge. That's why we need more women in our clubs and more women in leadership positions.

We also need to remember that meeting new people and making sure they enjoy their membership is fun. We enjoy each other's company and have a great time doing whatever we do. We need to embrace these joyous experiences.

The best way for us to have fun is to be together — whether it is at a large gathering like this assembly or the Rotary International Convention, at a service project, or in our regular meetings. And being together makes us more effective.

And it should be no surprise that our vision statement begins with that word. “Together, we see a world where people unite and take action to create lasting change — across the globe, in our communities, and in ourselves.”

The vision statement forms the basis for Rotary’s new Action Plan, which you will have a critical role in implementing. This new Action Plan is all about growing Rotary and helping us adapt to the digital age. The time is now to take this Action Plan and run with it. Over the next five years, this plan will increase our impact, expand our reach, enhance participant engagement, and increase our ability to adapt.

I would like every Rotary club to have a strategic meeting at least once a year. Each club should be asking where it wants to be in five years and know what value it brings to members.

What makes Rotary so unique and worth sharing with the world? What unique opportunities do we open for you and for the people we serve?

We love people and, wherever we go in the world, Rotarians become our best friends and you wish you had more time with them. We are people from different backgrounds, different generations, languages, and cultures. Even the way that we live Rotary is different country to country and club to club. And that diversity makes us great.

We are held together by the values we share. We are all bound in friendship and we all believe in The Four-Way Test. Rotary is experienced a different way everywhere. But The Four-Way Test remains the same for everyone.

Rotary provides opportunities for service projects that can be performed and completed by us. These projects are meaningful and sustainable. In Rotary, we don’t just donate the money, we also perform the service and see the lasting impact of that service firsthand. This is unique.

Rotary has given many of us the opportunity to travel the world to help put our service ideas into action.

Rotary also provides opportunities for leadership. All of us have taken on great new responsibilities. This is our opportunity to strengthen our network, not for our personal glory, but for the good of Rotary. Creating pathways to leadership for others is a true Rotary ideal — and it will make you a more effective leader.

We are here because we believe in Rotary opportunities, in opportunities for others and for ourselves. We believe that our acts of service, big and small, create opportunities for people who need our help. We also know that every act of service will inspire and change us.

Here are four stories that illustrate this idea.

Training Leader Christina Covotsou-Patroclou:

My year as a district governor concluded with me filled with a newfound humility and awe for the service Rotarians in my district provide every year. From an underfunded and forgotten talent school, to the promise of a normal life for

children with heart disease or cancer, to the right of clean water in schools, Rotary creates opportunity and gives hope to those who may have none.

Training Leader Ludo Van Helleputte:

I found it in the eyes of a stranger, a connection to the world that I could not find in books. It came from a mother who offered her child to be vaccinated against polio during a National Immunization Day in India. The gratitude in her eyes spoke volumes. Two drops and a smile. ... It changed that child's life, but it also transformed mine. Rotary gave me the opportunity to create lasting change — leading to peace of mind within.

Training Leader Ahmed A. Saada:

At 28, Rotary gave me the opportunity to participate in a Group Study Exchange program. There, I met a professor who offered me a scholarship at Johns Hopkins University, where I could enhance my clinical research skills and earn a PhD. When I returned home, I was asked to join Rotary — and a new world of service opened for me. For the past 26 years, I have taken every opportunity to volunteer on medical convoys. But my greatest Rotary opportunity happened when I was a Rotaractor — that's where I met my wife and the love of my life, Rania!

Training Leader Mary B. Berge:

I was adopted at birth, raised in a small family of four. In high school, I hid in a bathroom stall many days, afraid to face the bullies. For years, I was content to follow, never realizing my untapped potential within. Rotary gave me the opportunity to be a citizen of the world, to lead, and to stand on this stage, with confidence and strength. What opportunities does Rotary have for me next? I don't know, but because of Rotary, I'm ready.

So as you can see, Rotary is not just a club that you join. It is an invitation to endless opportunities. It opens opportunities to serve in a project as big and historic as End Polio Now and also in a small community project, where you just plant a tree.

And it opens opportunities for you to live a richer, more meaningful life, with friends around the world, based on our core values.

As Rotarians, we are very blessed to take on leadership roles at this wonderful moment for our organization.

Everything we do opens another opportunity for someone, somewhere.

Therefore, the theme for our year is: *Rotary Opens Opportunities.*