

RI President-elect's Address

John Kenny, 2009-10 RI President

Birmingham, England

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It is a great honor to be speaking to you today, in the island on which I was born and raised, addressing you as the first Scottish president-elect of Rotary International in the 104-year-history of our organization.

As I look out at all of you here today, I think of the words of the Apostle Luke, who said, "To whomsoever much is given, much will be required; and to whomsoever much was entrusted, of him more will be asked." I know that much will be entrusted to me in the Rotary year we are soon to begin, and I am prepared to give all that I am able to this organization which I have served for the past 39 years. I am strengthened in that resolve in that I shall have the full support of my wife, June, as I continue that service in the months that lie ahead.

Every year, the Rotary baton passes to a new team of Rotarians, but whilst leaders in Rotary change, leadership does not, and in this process of continuity, Rotary manifests its greatest strength. You will add fresh ideas and energies to those who have gone before, so that you can pass on to your successors a better district and stronger clubs. Now is your time. It is for you to grasp the opportunity, for *The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands*. This is the theme I have chosen for the coming year. I have full confidence in each of you to ensure that the visionary fires of Rotary will burn more brightly at the end of our year.

When Paul Harris founded the first Rotary club 104 years ago, he did not initially think of service. Instead, he had in mind a place where people of good character, intelligence, and morals could enjoy each other's fellowship and friendship. The service came later, as a natural outgrowth of the gathering of such people.

When a club is formed of people who are honest, who are ethical, who enjoy each other's company and take pleasure in shared accomplishment for the good of all — that is a Rotary club as Paul Harris envisioned it. And that is a club that makes all of Rotary stronger.

We in Rotary have potential that is unmatched by any other humanitarian organization in the world. We can bring health to the sick, education to the illiterate, water to the thirsty, and sustainable livelihood to the poor and the hungry. We can help those closest to us and those in the farthest corners of the earth. All this we can do, if only we choose to.

And that is why, in the 2009-10 Rotary year, I selected the theme *The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands*. Because the future of Rotary will not be determined by me, or by any of Rotary's senior leaders — in this Rotary year or in any other. The future of Rotary will not be determined at this convention or by any decision by the Board of Directors of Rotary International. The future of Rotary is being decided every day, in every one of our clubs — by every one of you. *The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands*.

Everything Rotary is, and everything we do, lies with you — with the Rotarians in our clubs. Rotary International is its clubs, and without a strong and growing membership, there can never be a strong Rotary.

I do not intend to introduce any new programs or to set any ambitious new goals in the area of membership for the coming Rotary year. I will simply rely on you as responsible people to see to it that we have more qualified members, true Rotarians, at the end of the year than we had at the beginning. And I will rely on you to do your best to see to the mentoring of our newest members, for retention is no less important than recruitment.

I believe very strongly in the autonomy of the Rotary club, and in the ability of each club to determine where and how it should serve best. It is not for me, or for any of us, to limit a club's service to only the areas outlined from above in a given year. But we also strive for continuity in our service, so that we may continue to go from strength to strength. This is why we have emphases: to encourage Rotary clubs to direct their work in the broad areas where we have seen the greatest need, and the greatest benefit from Rotary service.

Water, health and hunger, and literacy will be our emphases in the year ahead. They will be our emphases because they are the areas in which we can do the most with our abilities and resources — and because they are the areas in which the world has the greatest need.

Water is our first emphasis because it is the first necessity for every man, woman, and child. We could, I suppose, all live without oil, but none of us could live without water. And so we must work to bring clean water to those who lack it, as well as ensure the safety of existing supplies. This is an area in which I have believed strongly, and worked consistently, for the last 20 years. And from my experience I will emphasize, as none of us can do too strongly, that water projects must encompass projects dealing with sanitation, because without adequate sanitation our good work is easily undone.

Health and hunger is the tent within which so much of our Rotary service dwells. We must all remember that when we work in this area, we are also working toward the greater goal of peace — for how can there be peace in the world when so many will try to sleep tonight without having eaten today?

And we will strive as well to bring literacy because, in the words of Nelson Mandela, “no country can succeed if its future leaders are not educated.” If Rotary is to be relevant in the 21st century, it must tackle these real problems of water, health and hunger, and illiteracy.

And we must strive for continuity in the years ahead, which is why your Board of Directors, after consultation with clubs and districts, has adopted the Rotary International Strategic Plan. The plan is designed to strengthen and proclaim the core values of Rotary: service, fellowship, diversity, integrity, and leadership.

Each and every one of us in Rotary is privileged, and every one of us in this room has enough to eat, and more. Every one of us can read and write. Every one of us can turn a tap and have clean water to drink. And every one of us knows that if we are ill, there is a doctor or a hospital where we can be cared for.

Every one of us should remember, every day, that there are hundreds of millions of people in the world who cannot say the same. Even as this world of ours appears to grow ever smaller, the gap between the haves and the have-nots is growing. I say this not because I think we should feel guilty about it. I say it because I believe that we've got a duty, all of us, as responsible people, to do something about it.

The Council on Legislation has, and rightly so, said that Rotary should not embark on any new global program until we have eradicated polio from the face of the earth. We must achieve this. As an organization, we have an obligation to society. Our credibility is at stake. We must do it, and we will do it. We have a wonderful story to tell. Two billion children immunized and the number of endemic countries reduced from 125 to 4. It is up to us to finish the job. The final success of the program is in your hands.

This coming year, I wish to remind Rotarians of the importance of the second Avenue of Service, Vocational Service. Fellow Rotarians, I firmly believe that if Rotary is about anything, it is about attaining and upholding high ethical standards in business and private life. The dignity of Rotarians, the honesty of Rotarians, should be and must be translated into their business practice and standards. The word of Rotarians must be their bond. In their everyday dealings, Rotarians should exemplify the Avenue of Service that we should hold so special, Vocational Service.

We were chosen when we were invited into Rotary to be the best representative of our business or profession. We should endeavor to ensure that we are worthy of that accolade. Perhaps in recent times, society has become too preoccupied by the bottom line without considering too closely how that bottom line is achieved. We live in a world in which too many know the cost of everything and the value of nothing. Let us remember the poet Wordsworth's stricture: "The world is too much with us; late and soon, getting and spending, we lay waste our powers." I believe that we, as Rotarians, must raise our voices to proclaim our values, for they are values worth proclaiming. We cannot remain forever part of the silent, cozy majority.

Each of us has moments that stay with us as Rotarians. They are the moments when we realize, when we really feel, why it is that we do what we do. And for myself, I think that many of those moments are the moments when I knew I'd really made a difference in the life of someone else.

I remember being in Tanzania, years ago. I was going 'round with other Rotarians, establishing water wells. It was right out there in the bush, hot and dusty and far from anything. We were in Dodoma, the very center of Tanzania, and one morning we walked into a village to open a well. There were some children there kicking a football about, and we joined them, which of course they loved. They'd seen us there for the digging of the well, so they knew who we were, and we were back in the village for the opening. And then before we left, there was this little girl who came up to me. She took my hand, and she looked up at me — I can see her yet — and there was something in her gaze. She looked up at me as though to ask, are you leaving?

It's something like that, the look in a child's eyes, that touches you. It's something like that that makes you want to do more, to do everything you possibly can. I wished I could have said to her that even though I was leaving, I was not leaving her. I wished I could have told her that I would be there for her and that Rotary would be there for her.

My wish for all of us is that in this Rotary year, we should be able to say the same thing — that we, and all Rotary, will be there for that little girl, and for every child who is still waiting for a well to be dug, for a clinic to be opened, for the chance to go to school.

My friends, I look forward to receiving your support to help me guide our wonderful organization on the path that has been laid out for us — toward a stronger Rotary and a better, healthier, and more peaceful world. *The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands.*