

# President's Closing Remarks

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RI President

The Scottish-born writer Robert William Service once said, "A promise made is a debt unpaid."

All of us here in this room have made a promise. We made it the day we became Rotarians, and the day we first put on a Rotary pin: We promised to be honest and ethical. We promised to help others, where and how we were able. And we promised to do what we could to help make the world a better place. We promised, in short, to put Service Above Self.

That is the promise that we made as Rotarians — a promise that is ours to keep, every day of our lives, in our clubs, our vocations, and our communities — for each of us, in our every interaction, is the public face of Rotary. Wherever we are, whatever we do, whenever we wear a Rotary pin, we are Rotary for all those who see us. As others see and judge us, so will all of Rotary be seen and judged. And that is not a responsibility to be taken lightly, for it is true as they say that a reputation takes a lifetime to build but a moment to destroy.

Each of you here is about to assume an even greater responsibility to uphold the honor and the reputation of Rotary. For you, as district governors-elect, will on the first of July be the official representatives of Rotary International in your Rotary districts. You will be the vital link in the chain that connects the senior leadership in Evanston to each and every one of our 1.2 million Rotarians around the world. Without you, we are nothing more than a collection of clubs, each focused on its own priorities. With you, we can work together, we can focus our efforts where they will be the most effective, we can be and achieve more.

Every year, the baton of Rotary leadership passes to a new class of Rotary leaders. Paul Harris passed it to his successors, and soon it will be passed to you. As district governors-elect, the future of Rotary is, indeed, in your hands. And that is why we have gathered here in San Diego, and why we have spent this week together. Each of you entered to learn; soon, you will go forth to serve. You are now a part of the tradition of Rotary leadership that has spanned so many generations. It is for you to bring new ideas and fresh enthusiasm, to build on the accomplishments of your predecessors, and to leave better districts and stronger clubs to those who will come after you.

I deeply believe that the most important service we give as Rotarians is not the work we do in any one year or through any particular office: It is the work we do throughout our entire Rotary careers, the service we render through our clubs. The time we spend in office deepens our understanding and our appreciation of Rotary, and it gives us the opportunity to make the connections that help bring our service to higher levels. But it is the time we spend in our clubs — the time we spend in our weekly meetings, involved in our projects, planning and organizing with our fellow club members — that builds Rotary's success, and builds its future. It will be your job in the coming Rotary year to strengthen and support those clubs, to make sure that they are warm and inviting, that they offer fellowship and friendship, that they function smoothly, and that they serve well.

Each of us here today must understand and appreciate the importance of the club, the centrality of the club in Rotary. For I say if it does not happen in the club, it just does not happen. Whatever we say here in San Diego, whatever plans we make, whatever inspiration and ideas come to us, none of it will come to anything if we cannot reach and equip and inspire and educate our clubs. The club is now, and will always remain, the most important part of all of Rotary. And this is why the club, and the health and success of each individual club, must be the focus of every past, current, and future district governor — and of every Rotarian.

This is not for a moment to say that it is our job as Rotary leaders to dictate the service that is carried out in our clubs, for we must always be mindful that our clubs are composed of volunteers, of businesspeople and professionals who have chosen to serve through Rotary. It is not our job to control that service, but it is very much our job to help direct and guide it: to make sure that the service of each club is as effective and as efficient as it can possibly be. This we must do with tact, with discretion, and with care.

It will be your job in the year ahead to ensure that each club in your district has goals and strives to meet them, that every Rotarian understands the goals of this Rotary year and how they can best be achieved. For as the playwright Anton Chekhov wrote, "If you cry 'Forward,' you must without fail make plain in which direction to go."

In this week that we have just shared together, you have, I hope, all learned a great deal. You have come to understand what awaits you and how much depends on what you will do in the months and year ahead. You have seen how much Rotary has done, and is doing, in so many corners of the world. And most important, you have seen how much there is for Rotary to do. You have seen what Rotary is capable of achieving. And you have seen how much of it depends on you.

A Rotary year goes quickly, and a year of Rotary office quicker yet. July first may not seem close from the end of January, but I can promise you it will be here before you know it. Do not waste the months that remain to you, or the energy that you will take with you when you leave here tomorrow morning. Use them well — in planning, in preparation, and in cooperation. Know your future club presidents, and know your clubs.

Do not plan to reinvent the Rotary wheel, but learn from the current and past officers in your district, for they will each have experience that will be valuable to you. And do not neglect the work of this Rotary year for that of the year that is to come, for the best preparation for tomorrow is doing your best today.

Everyone in this room is about to be given a tremendous opportunity and, with it, a tremendous responsibility. You have not, I know, accepted the responsibility of your office lightly, and I know that you each intend to uphold the dignity of that office to the fullest. I know as well that each of you understands how important your work is, for it is true as John Burroughs wrote: "For anything worth having, one must pay the price; and the price is always work, patience, love, self-sacrifice — no paper currency, no promises to pay, but the gold of real service."

I tell you all, my friends, my fellow Rotarians — *The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands*. It is in your hands in the months ahead, as you prepare; it will be in your hands during your year in office; and it will remain in your hands for as long as each of you remains a Rotarian. For as I often say, a Rotary office is ours for only a year, but we are Rotarians for a lifetime.

Rotary has never been a universal concept; we are selective in whom we admit, and that is as it should be. Rotarians are and must be people of a certain caliber, people with the capacity to do great deeds, the sense to do them wisely, and the strength of character to do them honestly and well.

Rotary has grown and blossomed for 105 years because we have placed Service Above Self, and because we have lived by The Four-Way Test. And Rotary has grown because Rotarians have never forgotten that what built the very first Rotary club was not service but fellowship. It was the promise of a warm welcome in a strange city that brought the first Rotarians back to their second meeting in Chicago, and it is what all of us have found here in San Diego this week.

I thank you all for inviting me to share in this Rotary fellowship with you. I thank you for the service you are giving, and I remind you all that *The Future of Rotary Is in Your Hands*.