

For my initial membership offering to the District, I would like to present a jewel from the pen of Cliff Dochterman. Cliff is a past president of RI ('92-'93) and has held nearly every position imaginable in Rotary. He is the author of the booklet, "ABC's of Rotary," and he has some definite views on membership growth that I think you will find interesting. While he covers several membership topics, the main thrust of his speech is on recruitment. Cliff gave this presentation at the Presidential Membership Conference near Phoenix this past January. After his speech, I tracked him down and persuaded him to send me a copy of his notes. It's a bit long, but worth the effort.

## PRACTICAL STEPS TO ROTARY MEMBERSHIP GROWTH

This address actually began about two years ago. It all started at a club assembly in our Rotary Club. One member stood up and said, "We keep talking about getting new members, the importance of retaining members, why our club should have more members, and the new goal our International President has set for new club members – but no one really tells us how to do it. I don't know exactly what to say to a friend or neighbor about joining Rotary. Just give us some practical steps to help our club grow."

So it became clear to me that many of our members have heard many of the speeches about increasing our membership, but apparently we were not giving our club members practical ideas to solve the problems. So, I'd like to give just a few simple suggestions to that question which was asked at that club assembly.

My first practical suggestion is just Open Your Door to Rotary Guests. Every member should take the opportunity to "invite a guest" as a normal procedure for every Rotary meeting. Nobody hesitates to invite a friend, a customer, a business associate, a relative to join you for lunch or dinner. But, why should we hesitate to invite these same people to have a meal with us at Rotary. Inviting guests to Rotary should just become a "normal way of life" for every Rotarian. You don't have to "sell" Rotary if you have a good Rotary club, -- with warm fellowship and good programs, Rotary sells itself. There is no reason that a Rotary Club should not have 4 or 5 guests each week or at least have one week a month specified as "visitors day," and everyone brings a guest. They don't all have to be prospective members, but some will. The guests should be introduced around to the club members. Perhaps they will see why Rotary has become something special in your life. Soon, you will be having friends asking you, "How does one become a member of your Rotary Club?" And that starts when Rotarians share their Rotary experiences with friends and associates.

The second suggestion would be – "Don't get hung-up on some 100% attendance expectation." It is impossible to estimate the number of good Rotarian prospects who are immediately "turned-off" by our good intentioned Rotarians who preach many unrealistic and inaccurate attendance requirements. We must recognize that the world of business and professions has changed in the past 50 years. The demands on personal time of young executives are entirely different than many of us faced 30 or 40 years ago. With computers, lap-tops, I-pods, text messaging, I-phones, blackberries and ever increasing new technology, business and professional people are expected to be available at every moment. No longer do managers just walk down the street for the weekly Rotary luncheon. It is not unusual that some of our finest Rotarians are traveling the world and fortunate to be able to maintain 50% attendance. So, it is time to stop pressing for 100% attendance for those who find that impossible, but they still believe in the mission of

Rotary. Our Club leaders must give a lot more slack to young business and professional persons. If we want to invite and retain these men and women as Rotarians, we must understand the new time demands upon people's lives, and be prepared to excuse attendance as necessary and reasonable. Of course, we desire and need all members at every meeting, even though our requirement is only 50%. But, please, let's not turn away prospects for membership by unrealistic claims of attendance requirements which some clubs seem to make.

The third recommendation is to promote continually the good work of your Rotary Club. We must let the community know what Rotary is doing. Rotarians have to take on this task – the media will not do it for us. We have to write the messages, take the pictures, make the high quality videos, distribute the public service announcements and make it easy for the media to tell the stories about Rotary. We must promote, and then promote some more. If we want the message of our Rotary service told, we must first complete some interesting and worthwhile activities, than tell the story with professional style and attractiveness. Fifty years ago, you could never find a respectable attorney, doctor, dentist, hospital, university administrator or other professional who would “lower himself” to advertise publicly. But, today television and widespread media have made a difference. Today, advertising is a way of life. You promote yourself or you are left behind. The same is true of a Rotary Club. The old Rotary idea that we should never advertise or promote ourselves is long gone. It is absolutely essential that the public should know what Rotary is and what Rotary does, if we want to attract new members and gain the support a Rotary Club needs within our communities. An active public promotion program for our good work is essential if you want community leaders to think “I would really like to become a member of that kind of organization.” Good public relations, conducted on a regular organized basis, are critical in promoting club membership. And the reality is -- nobody is going to do it for us.

The next suggestion I offered was to expand the size of our Rotary tent.” In many parts of the world, Rotary seems to thrive on elitism and exclusiveness. I certainly do not criticize those who hold that belief. But, on the other hand, that is not really the philosophy of Rotary in North America, where we believe that high quality and quantity can both be achieved. Our Rotary Clubs are far more interested in building their Clubs with all the managerial people who desire to give their time and resources to activities of community and humanitarian service. For our long term survival, Rotary Clubs must be far more inclusive rather than exclusive. Let us face the facts -- most of our Rotary Clubs do not reflect the diversity of their community. I do not suggest that we reduce our standards, but there are far too many ethnic and minority community leaders who have been totally overlooked. There are far too many women executives who have never been invited to consider Rotary membership. There are far too many young executives, on their way up the business and professional ladder, who have never been approached for Club membership. There are far too many eligible spouses, family members, former Foundation Alumni and Rotaractors who have never been considered as potential Rotarians. A Rotary Club can have a much larger tent, if we only look for qualified people who have never been invited to come to a meeting or consider membership. If Rotarians actively seek to expand their circle of friends to diverse segments of the community which have not been asked, there is a large potential of good eligible Rotarians. This may require a somewhat different mind set than we are accustomed – but it is worth the effort.

I was a Rotarian for many years when it was a male only membership. Many members found it difficult to open Rotary doors to women. But those days are passed. So, I suggest

that if there are still Rotary Clubs in your area which do not welcome women members, then you have both the obligation and opportunity to charter an additional Rotary Club which has a dual gender membership.

Once we have identified the men and women we believe should be Rotarians, then we must ask -- and ask -- and ask. This I know from personal experience. I was proposed three times before I was accepted for membership in my first Rotary Club. If my sponsor had not have been persistent, I assure you I would never have been given that great privilege in my life – to become a Rotarian. If you think of persons who should be Rotarians, propose them. And don't give up. Invite them again. Circumstances often change. Invite them again. It is a known fact, most eligible people have not joined Rotary for one single reason – they have never been asked. And sometimes you need to ask again.

The fifth recommendation to help expand membership and retention is to remove the unofficial "reserved signs" at our weekly meetings. How many clubs have you visited which has a chair "reserved for Charlie" because he has sat there every week for twenty years? In many clubs there are tables of very close Rotary friends who regularly sit at the same spot week after week. Of course they enjoy Rotary with their friends. But these Rotarians seldom meet a visitor, a guest or potential member, because they just enjoy Rotary with their few close friends. They never make an effort to greet a new friend or welcome a newcomer. It is quite possible to go into a club with a room half filled with Rotarians that prospective members, guests or even new members may never meet. A closed circle of friends is not the kind of fellowship we should find or expect in Rotary, especially if we are trying to put out the welcome mat to up-and-coming business and professional men and women. And the amazing thing is that there are so many other Rotarians in the Club that the "closed table group" would also enjoy -- if they would merely welcome them into their circle. Open fellowship is a key factor of a Rotary Club which hopes to attract new members.

The next suggestion seems so simple, but is so difficult for some Rotarians –how to describe their Rotary Club in three or four sentences. So often Rotarians are asked "What is Rotary and what does your Rotary Club do?" It is essential that we teach our members how to answer that question in an interesting and concise manner. I've heard some of the dullest and uninteresting responses to these questions you could ever imagine. The answer must convey an excitement of a fun and informative meeting, the warmth of a group of friends, the prestige of a hundred year old worldwide fellowship, the rewards of building a better community and the pride in working for peace and world understanding. Most of our members must be taught how to describe the rewards of belonging to one of the world's most influential and prestigious organizations. When someone asks, "What is Rotary? Or tell me about your Rotary Club." All of our members should have a quick response:

**"Our Rotary Club belongs to Rotary International, which was the world's first service Club, organized over 100 years ago. We are one of the 32,000 Rotary Clubs in over 200 countries and territories in the world. We meet every week where we combine a lot of fun with interesting programs, and then we take on a whole variety of service activities for our community and reach out to people in need around the world. We represent a cross section of our community because we promote high ethical standards and good business practices. A lot of our activities involve young people in our area, as well as the poor and aged, and our number one world wide activity is the eradication of polio in the world...."**

**And we always have lots of fun. There are so many more things I could tell you if you are really interested and have a moment.”**

When asked “What is Rotary?” each of us should have a prepared response on the tip of our tongue. Almost all of us have ready answers when asked about our business, profession, hobby, church, college, family or grandchildren. It is essential that every one of our members learn how to talk about our Rotary Club in an exciting and convincing manner. And we may have to actually teach the Rotarians in our Club how to do it.

And, most of all, if we want Rotarians to invite their friends and associates to become members, the Rotarians, themselves, have to be fully involved and excited about their Rotary Club. To get excited about Rotary, every Rotarian has to be actively engaged in some kind of satisfying Club activity. This is one of the most difficult tasks of a Club President and club leaders – find a worthwhile job for every member. Rotarians like to know they are doing something of value. Service means worthwhile activity. When Rotarians feel the satisfaction of achievement, there is seldom any desire to drop out and they will eagerly share their enthusiasm. Good activities for every member, plus interesting and enjoyable meetings are the only sure answer to solid Club retention and expanded membership. A member who loves Rotary will be your greatest salesman for new Rotary memberships.

What this message is all about is that we have to do more than wring our hands about declining membership. Our approach to prospective members and even to new Clubs has got to change. We don't drive the old Nash or Studebaker car any longer. We don't have the telephone hanging on the kitchen wall any longer. We don't use carbon copy in the old typewriter any longer. We don't buy a pound of sugar in a paper sack tied with a string at the local grocery store any longer. We don't listen to Amos and Andy or the Lone Ranger on the radio set any longer. The ways we conducted business 75 years ago is not the way business works today. And those old Rotary procedures for membership and new club growth are certainly not the same. There are far more competitive activities in the lives of executives today to expect that Rotary will survive in the same old patterns. That doesn't mean that the old ways were wrong – it means that the world of business and the demands of the communities in which we live have changed.

All of us can also think about the potential for a new club which will meet a special population in your community. It may be possible that new Rotary Club will meet with a sack lunch, rather than a sit-down served luncheon. There are new clubs meeting in early evening as members begin their commute to home. Perhaps a Rotary Club might just involve the stores in a huge shopping center or mall, or high rise building or on a large university campus, or in an airport complex. A Rotary Club may meet on a golf course on Saturday morning just before tee time. When we think about new growth, lets not dream of just cloning our existing clubs – lets use the imagination and creativity which places Rotary wherever a group of men and women leaders exist who believe in fellowship and service.

There are no reasons that Rotary International has to settle for a slow decline in membership. We do not need consultants or outside advisors to help us expand Rotary membership. Within the creative minds of Rotarians, who are some of the world's most successful business and professional people, we have those with the vision of Rotary's future. Let's use those creative ideas and new approaches in meeting new populations of busy young executives.

Your kids are not raising their kids the way you raised your kids. The world of Rotary today is not the Rotary of our grandfathers. Many of the ways which were perfect for earlier generations may not be effective in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. In this Presidential membership seminar, I hope each one of us gets some new ideas and captures a new vision of the future of our own Rotary Clubs. There is no harm in stealing a few good ideas to take back to your Club. Just remember, we will never get the membership results we want -- by always doing what we have always done.

The task of membership is a serious one. There are far too many people in the world depending upon the good work of Rotary – and we can't let them down. And we won't, if our Clubs are kept strong, energetic and filled with the excitement of a great Rotary fellowship. We all can learn a few ideas at the Conference to take home to our clubs, -- so let's do it.