



Introduction

This report is a compilation of the most successful initiatives, innovations and lessons reported by clubs participating in the **Fit for Purpose program**. It draws heavily on responses received through the "What Worked" survey, which captured the changes clubs implemented, the outcomes they achieved and the insights they gained along the way. It also incorporates lessons learned from successful initiatives undertaken both within and beyond the program, together with my own observations and reflections from helping to develop and lead the Fit for Purpose process.

Special thanks to Barbara Mifsud for her efforts in creating, distributing, and compiling the responses from the Qualtrics survey sent to all participating clubs in the Fit for Purpose program.

The survey responses revealed a remarkable range of successful innovations. Clubs reported stronger member engagement, improved culture, more interesting meetings, increased community visibility, stronger partnerships and, in many cases, improved membership outcomes. Collectively, these examples demonstrate that clubs are capable of adapting, innovating and thriving when they are willing to challenge traditional assumptions and embrace new ideas.

Not every participating club was able to implement its Club Fitness Plan in full. In some cases, the challenges of change proved difficult to overcome and identified initiatives never progressed beyond the planning stage. While there are lessons to be learned from those experiences, the most consistent barrier was rarely a lack of ideas or opportunities. More often, it was the difficulty of translating intention into action and sustaining the collective will needed to drive meaningful change.

The purpose of this report is not to dwell on those challenges. Rather, it is to provide clubs with a practical resource of proven initiatives, successful innovations and hard-earned lessons from clubs that have already tested new approaches and achieved positive outcomes. My hope is that every club will find ideas within these pages that can be adapted, improved and implemented locally. If the Fit for Purpose program has demonstrated anything, it is that clubs willing to learn from one another, embrace change and remain focused on serving their communities have every reason to be optimistic about the future.

The Penny has Dropped. We're finally realising it's not all about meetings.

I believe our greatest challenge is to transition from a meeting-centric operating system to a service-centric operating system. The irony is difficult to ignore. The very operating model creating many of Rotary's recruitment barriers is also the model many clubs are most reluctant to change.

For more than a decade, this has been the most consistent message I have delivered to Rotary audiences across our region. I have repeatedly argued that Rotary's future depends less on how often we meet and more on the impact we create. Meetings should support service, not become the primary purpose of the organisation. What encouraged me most about the Fit for Purpose responses was the growing evidence that clubs are finally beginning to understand this distinction. Increasingly, clubs are questioning long-held assumptions about meetings, experimenting with more flexible ways of engaging members and placing greater emphasis on meaningful service, community impact and member experience.

For many senior Rotarians, the weekly meeting remains central to the Rotary experience. It provides routine, fellowship, friendship and a strong sense of belonging. But for younger, time-poor volunteers, the value proposition often looks very different. They are willing to contribute, keen to serve and motivated to make a meaningful difference. But they do not necessarily see weekly meetings as the best or most productive use of their limited time.

The FFP survey responses point to a clear pattern. Clubs that recognised this tension often acknowledged that changes to meeting culture generated the greatest internal resistance. Yet those same clubs also reported that, when they pushed through that resistance and successfully modernised their meeting and engagement models, they achieved some of the strongest membership outcomes.

This is particularly significant because clubs were not only challenged to innovate around meetings. Many implemented broad-ranging reforms across promotion, service project selection, fundraising, cause selection, administration and governance. These changes all contributed positively. However, the survey responses suggest that the greatest membership returns came from clubs willing to rethink the way members gather, connect, contribute and belong.

One size does not fit all. Diversity in membership requires diversity in clubs.

The responses strongly suggest there is no single “correct” Rotary model. Clubs are succeeding with very different approaches depending on their local communities, demographics and member expectations. The evidence increasingly points to the need for greater diversity in how clubs operate if we genuinely want greater diversity in membership.

Rotary now offers a far broader range of club models than ever before, including e-clubs, passport clubs, satellite clubs (likely soon to be known as companion clubs), cause-based clubs and hybrid models. Collectively, these models provide enormous flexibility in how people connect, contribute and experience Rotary.

Yet despite this expanded toolkit, the traditional meeting-centric club model still overwhelmingly dominates the Rotary landscape. While many clubs are beginning to adapt elements of flexibility and innovation, the survey responses suggest we are still only scratching the surface of what a more diverse and contemporary Rotary ecosystem could look like.

Reduce the friction. Cost, time and format matter more than we sometimes admit.

A further pattern emerging from the most recent club feedback is that successful change often began with removing practical barriers to participation. Several clubs did not wait for a completely new club model. They simply made the existing experience easier to attend, easier to afford and easier to fit into modern life.

West Pennant Hills and Cherrybrook moved to a mix of two face-to-face meetings and two Zoom meetings each month, explicitly to reduce meeting costs, avoid traffic and make participation easier for time-poor members. The same club also moved from a function centre to a pub with bistro meals and a private room, removing the obligation to pay for a set meal and reducing the risk of minimum catering costs.

Upper Blue Mountains Sunrise reported a similar lesson. By changing to two face-to-face meetings, one Zoom meeting and one social meeting in the community, the club created a more flexible rhythm. It also negotiated with its venue to reduce costs and pass savings back to members. **Gungahlin** likewise identified member satisfaction as a priority and responded by reducing annual dues, introducing popular social gatherings, rotating the chair of meetings and improving its new member process.

These examples reinforce a simple point. Sometimes the issue is not that people do not value Rotary. It is that the traditional way of accessing Rotary has become too expensive, too rigid or too inconvenient. Clubs that lower the friction of membership make it easier for people to say yes, and easier for existing members to stay engaged.

Ask your community what they want and stop trying to decide for them.

Many successful initiatives emerged because clubs listened carefully to their communities and responded to genuine local needs. The strongest projects were not created in isolation. They were shaped through partnerships, conversations and community feedback. Communities support Rotary most when they can see Rotary responding directly to issues they care about.

A recurring theme that emerged from both the Fit for Purpose responses and wider observations across Rotary was the tendency for clubs to continue running the same events, projects or fundraisers year after year without regularly evaluating whether they were still achieving their original purpose.

The pattern was often the same. A club would launch an event that proved enormously successful. Encouraged by that success, the event would be repeated the following year and perhaps many years after that. Over time, however, attendance declined,

fundraising outcomes weakened, volunteer fatigue increased or the community's interest shifted elsewhere. Yet the event continued largely unchanged.

In many cases, the project had become part of the club's identity. Members enjoyed it, it was familiar, and everyone knew how to run it. What had originally been a response to a community need had gradually evolved into an activity sustained more by tradition than by impact.

I have come to think of this as the "Groundhog Day" approach to club planning. Clubs keep doing what they have always done because it feels safe, because it is familiar, or because nobody has stopped to ask whether there might be a better way. As membership numbers decline and members age, these clubs often find it increasingly difficult to sustain the same activities, yet they continue investing significant energy into maintaining the status quo rather than exploring new opportunities.

This creates an important question for every club: are we responding to genuine community needs, or are we simply repeating a well-rehearsed program that satisfies our own expectations? Communities change. Their priorities change. Volunteer expectations change. Clubs that fail to regularly review their projects through the lens of community impact risk becoming less relevant over time.

That loss of relevance carries consequences. It becomes harder to attract community support, harder to build partnerships and harder to attract new members. Prospective members are often looking for opportunities to contribute to contemporary causes that matter to them. If every project, event and fundraiser is inherited from previous generations without question, there is little room for new ideas, new energy and new passions to emerge.

This is not an argument for abandoning successful projects. Many long-running Rotary initiatives continue to make a significant difference and deserve to be preserved. Rather, it is an argument for continual evaluation. Clubs need to be willing to ask difficult questions about whether a project is still achieving meaningful outcomes, whether it remains relevant to the community, and whether there are emerging needs that deserve equal attention. The healthiest clubs are often those that can honour their successful traditions while still creating space for innovation, experimentation and new member-led initiatives.

Glenelg ran a very successful community forum last year, attracting over 50 non-Rotarian participants, giving them a number of amazing project ideas and a few membership prospects too. The club has produced a "how to" guide for clubs wanting to run similar events.

Inspired by Glenelg's success, the nearby **Seaford** club has decided to run a community engagement campaign to attract ideas for a major local project to celebrate the club's 10th birthday. The club will be putting \$10,000 towards this project.

Como took this principle a step further by inviting community organisations to pitch projects directly to Rotary members. Rather than deciding internally what the community needed, the club created an opportunity for local organisations to present ideas and explain the impact Rotary support could have. Members then assessed the proposals against agreed criteria before selecting projects to support.

The initiative required considerable preparation and community engagement, but the outcomes extended well beyond project selection. It generated stronger community connections, increased the club's visibility and created more engaging meetings. Perhaps most importantly, members felt a greater sense of ownership because they had been directly involved in identifying and selecting the projects that would become the club's focus.

Communities are often remarkably good at identifying their own needs. Clubs that create genuine opportunities to listen are frequently rewarded with stronger projects, stronger partnerships and greater relevance.

Borrow good ideas shamelessly, then localise them.

Another important message from the survey responses is that clubs do not need to invent every initiative from scratch. Some of the strongest reported outcomes came from clubs that borrowed a proven idea, adapted it to their own community and then committed to implementing it properly.

The **Ballina on Richmond** domestic violence model was repeatedly referenced. **Scone** used it as the basis for a whole-of-community domestic violence awareness campaign, including a walk, guest speaker, phone boxes, purple shirts, information

cards, bows around town and coasters in clubs and pubs. **Windsor** also adopted the model, staging a *Walk, Run, Ride against domestic violence* and establishing a contact website to direct local enquiries to support organisations. **Glenelg** and **Corrimal** reported *Purple Friday* initiatives inspired by the same approach.

This is significant because it shows that replication is not the enemy of innovation. In fact, Rotary should be very good at replication when the original idea is sound. The key is not to copy mechanically, but to understand why the idea worked and adapt it to local need, local partners and local capacity.

Partnerships let clubs do work that is bigger than the club.

Feedback also strengthens the case for partnership-based service. **Havelock North** developed ongoing partnerships with *Re-Source*, a Hastings charity connecting surplus items with community need, and *Eye Care for Africa*, where club members collect, check, clean, measure and ship pre-used prescription glasses. The club reported that the work captured the attention of members because the need was genuine and the partnership gave members a clear practical role.

Emerald and District introduced a *Dementia Cafe* as an ongoing response to social isolation among older people, engaging non-Rotarians as participants and volunteers and building a model intended to be repeatable by other Rotary clubs. **Murray Bridge** presented a Rotary Showcase of current projects for members of the public looking for volunteer and service opportunities. That led to volunteers for a *Birthing Kit Assembly Community Day* and helped support a much larger *Pioneer Adventure Day* involving multiple Rotary clubs and other service clubs.

These examples suggest that the strongest projects increasingly sit at the intersection of community need, member energy and external partnership. They are not just things Rotary does for the community. They are things Rotary does with the community.

Don't put the cart before the horse. Get the product right before you try to sell it.

Multiple clubs discovered that membership growth was more often the result of club improvement than the starting point for it. Clubs that strengthened culture, flexibility, purpose and member engagement consistently found that recruitment became easier and retention improved.

The message is clear: before we focus on marketing Rotary externally, we must ensure the internal member experience is genuinely attractive. We have identified repeatable and successful recruitment approaches, but recruitment campaigns alone will not solve underlying structural or cultural problems within clubs.

Too often, falling membership triggers an immediate push for recruitment activity without first addressing the reasons members may be disengaging or leaving. The evidence suggests that clubs must first examine the quality of the Rotary experience they are offering, including meeting culture, flexibility, relevance, member involvement and overall club atmosphere.

If new members are brought into a club environment that is not functioning well, the risk is not simply that they leave. The greater danger is that they leave carrying a negative perception of Rotary and communicate that experience more broadly within the community. In that sense, unsuccessful recruitment can sometimes compound the very membership challenges clubs are attempting to solve.

The survey responses suggest that membership growth is often the outcome of club improvement rather than the starting point for it.

Give members ownership, especially new members.

A recurring thread in the feedback is that engagement improves when members are given genuine ownership rather than simply being asked to attend more meetings or help with existing activities. **Campsie** reported allocating \$2,000 to new members towards a project they coordinate. The point was not just the money. It was the invitation for new members to find a purposeful cause aligned with their own interests and Rotary's values, and then see the positive impact of their project in the community.

Palm Beach similarly reported that younger members had been encouraged to become very involved in fundraising efforts and to bring forward their own ideas. **Turrumurra** is revamping its mentorship experience, while several clubs reported that listening to member feedback was the starting point for reform.

This matters because retention is not created by induction alone. New members need to understand Rotary, but they also need to shape it. A club that gives newer members permission, resources and trust to lead meaningful work is far more likely to convert early enthusiasm into long-term belonging.

Recruitment works best as a pathway, not a one-off event.

The responses also provide stronger evidence that recruitment is most effective when it is treated as a repeatable pathway rather than an occasional membership drive. **Auckland Korean** created a structured Rotary Information Night after recognising that, in its community, the barrier was not lack of interest but lack of understanding about Rotary and what membership involves. The club built internal confidence first, then asked each member to bring one guest. The event attracted 20 attendees and resulted in five new members, with the process now documented so it can be repeated annually.

Camberwell took a different but related approach by using a major guest speaker event as a deliberate membership opportunity. After months of planning, the club hosted (former AFL footballer) Eddie Betts at a weekly dinner, promoted the event locally with flyers and posters, encouraged members to bring prospective members, and attracted close to 100 guests. The event generated five prospective members, with one inducted and others expected to follow. **South Wairarapa** reported success with a smaller cocktail evening for invited guests, while **Windsor** staged a recruitment function based on [the Ford model](#) and gained its first corporate member.

The common element is not the format of the event. It is the intentionality. Successful recruitment involved clear purpose, member ownership, personal invitation, preparation, welcoming follow-up and a reason for prospects to understand Rotary beyond a generic request to join.

Invest in your promotional inventory. Your product won't sell itself.

Good work alone is no longer enough if nobody hears about it. Successful clubs increasingly recognised the importance of visibility, storytelling and promotion. Social media, public events, partnerships and clear external communication all played a significant role in attracting interest, strengthening community awareness and improving membership outcomes. In particular, the refreshing or rebuilding of club websites was repeatedly reported as a successful initiative in generating community interest and improving the public image of clubs.

However, effective promotion requires investment, and this remains an area where many clubs are hesitant to spend money. Traditionally, expenses such as signage, advertising, banners, websites, promotional materials and flyers have often been treated as administrative costs, funded directly from member subscriptions. As a result, promotional spending is frequently viewed as discretionary or difficult to justify.

One of the challenges presented through the FFP process was encouraging clubs to rethink this mindset. Clubs were challenged to consider promotion not as an optional administrative overhead, but as a legitimate operational cost of delivering successful Rotary programs and sustaining healthy clubs. Consider the ubiquitous sausage sizzles, where we all understand that we have to deduct the costs of sausages, bread, serviettes, sauces and gas before we realise our profit. Club promotion should be regarded in the same way, as a legitimate cost of doing business.

The survey findings suggest that clubs willing to invest in visibility and communication are far better positioned to attract members, build partnerships and maintain relevance within their communities. In an increasingly crowded and competitive volunteer landscape, clubs cannot assume that good intentions and good projects will automatically generate awareness or engagement.

Transparency builds permission to change.

The feedback also points to a quieter but important lesson: members are more willing to accept change when they can see how decisions are being made and feel they have had a voice in the process. **Southern Mitchell** opened board meetings to all members, used club assemblies to generate discussion about club direction and reduced the more formal elements of meetings. The result was slower change, but also a more open culture in which members felt more comfortable expressing views.

Turramurra now provides updates on every board action and meeting. **Gungahlin** began by asking what was important to members and then revisited implementation to maintain momentum. **Upper Blue Mountains Sunrise** embedded its changes

through a detailed strategic planning process involving all members. **Whakatu** developed a strategic plan with a clear vision, priority partnerships and greater clarity about where fundraising and volunteer effort should be directed.

This does not mean every decision needs to be slow or consensus-driven. It does mean that communication, transparency and follow-through create trust. When members understand the reason for change, see that their views have been heard and receive regular updates, resistance is easier to manage and momentum is easier to sustain.

Was the juice worth the squeeze?

Throughout the Fit for Purpose program, clubs were asked to invest time, energy and often a considerable amount of goodwill into implementing change. Some modified meeting formats. Others reviewed governance structures, refreshed websites, launched new service initiatives, strengthened partnerships or experimented with entirely new approaches to member engagement. Looking across all of the survey responses, implementation comments and reported outcomes, one obvious question emerges. Was the effort worth it?



The overwhelming conclusion is “YES!”

Surprisingly, relatively few clubs described the implementation process as particularly difficult. Most successful initiatives were not dependent on large budgets, specialist expertise or significant structural reform. More often, clubs spoke about the importance of board support, member consultation, strategic planning and having a committed champion willing to drive the initiative forward.

This observation reinforces something I’ve been saying for many years. **“Our inability to reverse membership decline is due not to a lack of knowledge, but a lack of will.”** The barriers were rarely technical. They were usually cultural.

Another important observation was that the most commonly reported benefits aligned closely with the real purpose of the program: improving club performance, strengthening culture and encouraging innovation. Clubs frequently reported improved member engagement, better club culture, more interesting meetings, stronger community connections and increased visibility. These are not secondary outcomes. They are the conditions that make clubs healthier, more relevant and more attractive to both existing and prospective members. Membership growth is expected to follow from this kind of improvement, but the survey responses suggest that the deeper value of the program was in helping clubs become stronger, more purposeful and better equipped for the future.

The survey responses suggest that membership growth is often the outcome of club improvement rather than the starting point for it. The pattern appeared repeatedly. Clubs improved engagement. Improved engagement strengthened culture. Stronger culture improved relevance and visibility. Greater relevance and visibility then created better membership opportunities.

Many clubs entered the process searching for recruitment solutions. What they often discovered was that sustainable membership growth is less about finding better ways to sell Rotary and more about creating a Rotary experience that people genuinely want to be part of. Clubs that became more engaging, relevant, flexible and connected to their communities consistently reported stronger outcomes across a range of measures, with membership benefits frequently following as a consequence.

A further lesson was the importance of member ownership. Some of the strongest outcomes occurred when members were given genuine influence over projects, priorities and club direction. Whether through strategic planning processes, member engagement groups, project selection activities or initiatives led by newer members, clubs consistently reported stronger engagement when people felt they had a meaningful role in shaping the future of their club.

Community-facing initiatives also appeared to deliver particularly strong returns. Community forums, partnership projects, awareness campaigns, showcases and project pitch events frequently generated multiple benefits simultaneously. These activities improved visibility, strengthened community relationships, increased member engagement and often created recruitment opportunities as well.

Perhaps the most surprising finding was that many of the highest-return initiatives were relatively modest. Clubs reported success from reducing meeting costs, introducing online participation options, making meetings more flexible, improving

communication, increasing transparency and simply asking members what mattered to them. These were not revolutionary changes. They were practical responses to modern realities.

Taken together, the survey responses suggest that successful clubs are not necessarily the clubs making the biggest changes. They are often the clubs making the smartest changes. They remove friction, increase ownership, strengthen relevance and improve connections between members, projects and the communities they serve.

If there is one overarching lesson from the Fit for Purpose program, it may be this: the future of Rotary will not be secured by working harder at the things we have always done. It will be secured by continually asking whether the things we do still serve our members, our communities and our purpose. The clubs willing to ask that question honestly, and act on the answers, appear to be the clubs achieving the strongest outcomes.

Where there's a will, there's a way. Where there's no will there's no way.

One of the clearest findings from the survey responses was that mindset mattered more than resources. Clubs with determined leaders and motivated members consistently found ways to implement change, even when facing strong resistance. Conversely, clubs lacking collective will often struggled to move forward regardless of their situation.

This became particularly evident throughout the FFP process itself. As a condition of participation, the board of every nominating club signed an agreement committing to implement their club fitness plan in full. But when implementation became challenging, a clear divide emerged between the clubs that embraced the process and those that retreated from it.

The clubs that recognised the urgency of innovation, and understood that their future depended on adapting, generally pushed through discomfort, persisted with change and ultimately achieved the strongest outcomes. By contrast, some clubs effectively placed difficult reforms in the "too hard basket". Despite their initial commitment, little meaningful change occurred, and the opportunity for genuine renewal was largely lost.

We must seek constant improvement. Even when you're on the right track, you'll get run over if you just sit there.

Change must not be viewed as a one-off project, but as an ongoing discipline, regularly reviewing what works, adapting to changing expectations and maintaining momentum. The lesson was clear: standing still is increasingly becoming a risk in itself.

Across our zone, well over 100 clubs have disappeared in the past three years, with many others currently facing an uncertain future. Our concerning membership decline is not so much due to the one or two members leaving or dying here or there. It's more about the number of clubs closing, each taking 10 to 20 members with them at a time, most of whom choose not to continue their Rotary journey in another club. None of those clubs set out to fail. Most were almost certainly thriving organisations 15 or 20 years ago. But somewhere along the way, many appear to have stopped evolving. As the world around them changed, member expectations shifted and volunteerism transformed, they continued to operate largely as they always had.

Relevance is not something achieved once and then retained forever. It must be continually earned. Clubs that regularly challenge assumptions, seek improvement and adapt to changing circumstances are far more likely to remain healthy and sustainable than those that rely on past success as a predictor of future success.

There is a cautionary tale for every Rotary club, no matter how well they think they are currently travelling. The organisations that survive and thrive will not necessarily be the largest, oldest or most successful today. They will be the ones that remain curious, adaptable and willing to evolve. In a rapidly changing world, standing still is not maintaining the status quo, it is falling behind. The simplest example I like to use is if you picture yourself climbing up the down escalator. You've got to keep moving just to stay in the same place. The moment you relax, you get dragged down. This leads directly into the next paragraph.

You reap what you sow. Our destiny is not set in stone.

If we can accept that the actions (and inactions) of yesterday have created the outcomes of today, we must also logically accept that the actions of today will create the outcomes of tomorrow. We do not have to accept, and in fact must not accept that Rotary's downward membership trajectory is locked in stone. We can make changes today which will affect our tomorrows.

We need to ramp up the pace of change. We lose more members because the pace of change is too slow.

None of these ideas matter if they never get implemented at club level. I have spoken at literally hundreds of events across the zone over the last 20 years; including dedicated membership events, district conferences, club and/or group visits, PETS/PELDS, district assemblies (now known as club leader learning seminars). Without doubt, every time I feel I have landed a message. I see light bulbs switching on in the audience. I get people coming up to me in breaks telling me how keen they are to implement these changes in their clubs. Then, a year or so later, I speak at the same event, and nothing has changed, except we've lost another 5-10% of our members.

The number one reason that ideas so positively received at events like these never get implemented despite the best of intentions, is that club leaders have a paralysing fear that they will lose members who feel the pace of change is too fast. But here's why this is an irrational fear. I will concede that over the years we have indeed lost members from time to time who have felt the pace of change has been too fast. I'll admit that. But I will guarantee you that we have lost many more members over the years who have felt the pace of change has been too slow. And that doesn't take into consideration the thousands of potential members who never joined Rotary in the first place, because the pace of change has been too slow.

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Thank you to former Membership Portfolio Team Chair Andy Rajapakse for backing me with the Fit for Purpose concept. None of this would have been possible without Andy's unwavering support.

To my Club and Cultural Transformation team members, I owe an enormous debt of gratitude. They have been rock stars; full of ideas and inspiration, and ready to take on tasks whenever asked. They have never failed me. Thanks, team. I couldn't have done this without them.

To everyone involved with administering the Fit for Purpose program, thank you from the bottom of my heart. It was a monumental undertaking. The Club Transformation Workshop was a spectacular success. Special thanks to David Barton, Leole Malama-Prasad, and Stephen and Carol O'Connell for their extraordinary support in pulling off that event.

An enormous thank you to our Club Fitness Coaches, some of whom were also committee members, and some of whom also helped run the Club Transformation Workshop. Thanks also to our amazing presenters.

Most importantly, I want to acknowledge the change champions in those participating clubs that worked so hard to push their clubs forward and succeed in this program. I've met some wonderful new Rotary friends through this campaign. Thanks for sharing your great ideas and keep up the great work.

On 30 June, the Fit for Purpose program comes to a close. It also marks the end of my term as Chair of Club and Cultural Transformation, and my involvement with the Rotary South Pacific Membership Portfolio Team.

This has been a role into which I have poured my energy, commitment and belief in what Rotary can become. I am proud of what we have achieved, grateful for the people who have contributed to this work, and mindful that meaningful change is never the work of one person or one program alone.

Now is the right time for me to step down and make space for the ideas, energy and leadership of others who will continue to move our zone forward.

We have achieved a great deal, and there is still much more to do.



Mark Huddleston

Chair of Club and Cultural Transformation and Director of the Fit for Purpose program,
Rotary South Pacific Membership Portfolio Team 2004-2006.