

Presidential Conference 2000:

With the clang of a traditional gong, Past District Governor Raymond Wong convened Presidential Conference 2000: Hong Kong, attended by 460 Rotarians from 19 nations, on 25-27 February.

“The future of Rotary is in Asia,” said R.I. President Carlo Ravizza in his opening remarks at the conference, which was co-sponsored by The Rotary Foundation of R.I. “Twenty years ago, Asia membership was 14.6 percent of Rotary membership; today it is 25 percent.”

Dramatic changes have marked Hong Kong as well; on 30 June 1997, the world witnessed China’s resumption of sovereignty over Hong Kong. Soon after, economic pressures kicked in and many Asian currencies lost 40 to 60 percent of their value against the U.S. dollar. Now, nearly three years later, confidence is returning and the effects of the financial crisis are dissipating.

Within this context, Rotarians took on a number of topics for discussion, from “Adapting Rotary’s Ideal of Service in a Changing World” to PolioPlus in Asia, as well as service opportunities in non-Rotary countries in the region.

In his address and open forum, President Carlo called for an examination of core Rotary topics that are relevant the world over, including membership,

retention and the possibility of new attendance rules.

“We must create a more flexible organization and close the gap between leadership and you, the Rotarians,” said President Carlo.

The R.I. Board, he said, is trying to solve the membership problem in general and retention in particular, which he called the main problem.

“Many reasons are our own fault—such as the attendance rules. And for young people, membership is too expensive.”

Although membership has dropped in various parts of the world for different reasons, the largest loss has occurred—despite an economic boom period—in the United States, where work and family life have become increasingly demanding and adults seem to have less time for outside activities, including Rotary. In Japan, said President Carlo, the economic crisis is a factor, while in Europe, “there are many areas, like my club, where membership is increasing.”

Below: Keynote speaker the Honorable C.Y. Leung, convenor of the Executive Council of Hong Kong, S.A.R., spoke on the impact of the regional economy on community service. Right: Past district governors Raymond Wong (left) and Charles Loh address a group discussion session.



Plenary sessions offered excellent opportunities for lively, frank discussion. In a session titled “Acting with Credibility to Improve your Club’s Image in the Community,” Rotarians debated strategies for increasing membership and publicizing Rotary’s work.

Past District Governor J.L. “Pete” Morales of the Philippines proposed two ways to improve a club’s image:

“First, improve public relations. Communication with non-Rotarians and especially those affected by our service programs are a primary concern. Results can be maximized through the local media and Web sites.

“Second, act with credibility. When we’re credible, we’re looked on with respect and admiration. We’re candles in the darkness; we’re shining examples. Let us not only inform the public with public relations, but also live in the spirit of Rotary and the embodiment of its ideals.”

Other suggestions from the session included:

- > Secure a public relations professional from your club to publicize activities.
- > Make sure your club’s projects are relevant to your community.
- > Use Web sites and the Internet in your public relations efforts.

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> In addition to local media, talk to different community groups and local youth about Rotary.

> Use Group Study Exchange team members to talk to your community and youth, rather than sending out only Rotarians.

In his keynote address, Rotary Foundation Trustee Chairman Bill Huntley discussed the relevance of the Foundation as Rotary approaches its 100th anniversary. In particular, he outlined the new Rotary Centers for International Studies, a program involving seven universities around the globe, where 70 "World Peace Scholars" will study on a two-year basis to earn Master's degrees.

"You should feel very proud that The Rotary Foundation can go forward this way in peace," Chairman Huntley said.

He also discussed what comes after PolioPlus.

"Have we reached our peak?" Chairman Huntley asked the audience. "My

answer is a big 'no.' We're just beginning to realize what we can do. Whatever comes next, we'll be confident because we're not stepping out into the unknown. PolioPlus has shown us our strength, our power and our possibilities."

Continuing with the theme, regional PolioPlus Committee Chairman and Past R.I. Treasurer/Director Brian Knowles reviewed polio eradication efforts in Southeast Asia and the Western Pacific. "The ultimate success of polio eradication hinges on Asia and Africa," said Chairman Knowles, who also reported that India, with the highest number of polio cases worldwide, has seen a dramatic reduction in the past several years in its south and central regions. "India is the key to our goal of eradication in Southeast Asia," he said. "The strategy of National Immunization Days, targeting all children up to the age of five, is obviously working," said Chairman Knowles. "If we are to see final eradication, not only in Southeast Asia but in other polio-endemic regions, this strategy must continue." He concluded that Rotary and its partners are on target to reach the goal

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R.I. President Carlo Ravizza exchanges ideas with conference participants in Hong Kong.

of global polio eradication by 2005, the 100th anniversary of Rotary International.

On the conference's final day, several Rotarians shared their insight and experience regarding the many service opportunities in non-Rotary countries. "None of this work is easy—but it's certainly very rewarding," said Tony Castley, past president of the Rotary Club of Epping, Sydney, Australia, and current chairman of the three-district China-Australia Friendship Exchange, representing districts 9680, 9690 and 9750. Among the projects the group tackled was constructing water-pumping stations and storage tanks in remote Chinese villages. The stations and tanks have become larger and more elaborate, said Rotarian Castley. The group also helped renovate schools that had only dirt floors and no windows.

"What we have shown is that it *is* possible for non-Chinese-speaking Rotary clubs from other countries to have very successful and rewarding projects in China, even though Rotary isn't there to help supervise," he said. However, he warned, clubs must ensure that the type of aid offered is appropriate for the country. They also should work in conjunction with a reliable China aid organization, with its own people on site where the project is being conducted, to facilitate communication.

In his opening address on the first day of the conference, Past District Governor Wong remarked to Rotarians: "I hope you will enjoy these two days, make a lot of friends and go home more motivated and better-equipped than before." Without a doubt, Rotarians left the conference with those wishes fulfilled. ☉

• Anne Stein is associate editor of THE ROTARIAN.