GENERAL SECRETARY AND CEO'S REMARKS TO THE CONVENTION

John Hewko
16 June 2026

Good morning. Good morning, everyone.

We're now more than halfway through this year's international convention, and I want to thank Rotary members across Taiwan who have come to this convention. You've been wonderful ambassadors for this exciting global city of Taipei, and for the very special island of Taiwan.

Now, when I began writing this speech, I was looking for a little Taiwanese inspiration. And I found it and posted a video about it on our social media channels.

So one of my colleagues took me to try my first bubble tea. And on these screens, you can see clips of our visit. Taiwan has put inspiration in a colorful cup called bubble tea. Evanston has about a dozen bubble tea shops, including one right across the street from One Rotary Center. And you know what? It was instant inspiration, and I loved it. And it all started with someone handing me a cup and saying, "Try this."

Try this. That's the simplest, most direct form of marketing.

Bubble tea began in Taiwan in the 1980s and reached Evanston in the United States the same way it reached everywhere else. It didn't spread through a marketing campaign or a corporate strategy. It spread one person at a time — one person handing something to another and saying, "Try this." That approach is so simple and friendly, and it's surprising we don't use it more often.

Now, the world at times seems afraid to be friendly. People look down at their phones, and they rarely use them to call others. And I know because it's a miracle if my daughter ever calls me back. And because of that, many people have never felt more alone. In fact, loneliness has become a serious global problem. Because loneliness is not just the absence of people. It's the feeling that your presence does not register, does not matter. That you could come or go, and no one would really notice.

In fact, the crisis has become such that the World Health Organization has declared loneliness a global public health priority. Japan has appointed a minister for loneliness and passed legislation to track it. The pattern looks similar in Taipei, in Seoul, in any

city where people order their coffee on a phone and walk through the world with headphones, oblivious to their surroundings.

The good news is that you here in Taipei have found a way to beat those global trends. You have traveled across oceans and time zones to be with people who care about what you care about. You have prioritized belonging.

Now, the happy people you see behind me are all Rotary members. We took these pictures for a recent issue of *Rotary* magazine, which focused on happiness. One story in the magazine focused on the longest-running study of happiness in human history at Harvard, 85 years and counting. That study found that the strongest predictor of long-term well-being is not wealth. It's not your job. It's not even your genetics. It's the quality of your relationships. The science around loneliness is telling us what Rotary members have been telling each other for more than a century.

So how do we extend what is happening in this room to people who could benefit from Rotary? Well, let's start by being honest about why members stay engaged. They stay because they like the people they spend time with and can't wait to see them again. They stay because they find a shared purpose. Rotary is a place — maybe *the* place — where meaning and joy can be combined without apology. You don't just believe in something in Rotary. You work beside others who believe just as much.

Here's an example. Bill Feldt is a Rotary member near Seattle. He was one of the original champions of Rotary's malaria initiative in Zambia. That program became The Rotary Foundation's first program of scale. US$2 million from us — 4 million more from partners — and a huge impact in reducing malaria across Zambia.

But that's not how Bill talks about the project. When you ask him about it, he talks about a doctor and a friend. Mwangala Muyendekwa was a physician in Zambia. Sadly, Mwangala passed away a couple months ago. He and Bill got to know each other through their joint work. Bill stayed in Mwangala's home four times. Mwangala stayed with Bill and his wife in Washington. They emailed. They called each other.

In Bill's words, "It's very personal, this work." That is why people stay in Rotary. It's not just the project. It's the friendship inside the project.

Now, that kind of meaningful belonging is what the world is hungry for and often does not know how to find. In fact, doctors in some countries are now writing what they call "social prescriptions." They tell patients to volunteer, or take a group hike, or join a club. They are prescribing what Rotary has been offering for more than a century. And, unfortunately, too often we keep this prescription to ourselves. Because to share, we first have to listen.

We need to listen to current members about what sustains them. To former members about why they left. And especially to potential members who share our values but find that traditional weekly meetings don't always work for them.

Of course, there are some things about Rotary that we wouldn't want to change. The Four-Way Test. Our focus on ethics, service, and fellowship. Because some things about Rotary should never change.

But for Rotary to thrive, we have to adapt, because in some parts of the world, the forms Rotary has relied on — our meeting structures, our membership models, the culture of the club itself — were designed for a different era than the one we are living in today. And so new club models are not a retreat. They are a way of breaking down barriers we didn't mean to build, so more people can find the heart of Rotary.

Because the heart of Rotary is not the day of the week we meet. It is not the meal. It is not the format. The heart of Rotary is belonging through purpose. And the people we have just been describing — the ones whose presence does not register, the ones eating dinner alone — they are not always coming through our current door.

So what does reaching those people look like? It looks like creating new clubs that they find interesting and appealing. It looks like clubs experimenting with service-only meetings. Hybrid meetings. Clubs built around networking, or around families, or around a shared single cause. And even small adaptations on the standard club model can have a big impact.

A great example is a club just a few kilometers from here. The Rotary Club of Formosa Happiness was founded in 2014 by Roger Chin-Wei Tung. Two sister clubs chartered at the same time named themselves Elite and Excellent. Tung chose another name: Happiness. Because happy members create stronger clubs.

Under the current president, Ryan Yu-Tsung Chiang, the club has rebuilt itself around families, not as decoration, but as structure. Roughly 30% of the club's budget goes to social activity, 40% to community service — and the two are integrated, not run as separate categories. When a member can't make an event, their spouse can come in their place. Members' children volunteer alongside their parents. The club's flagship project, an after-school tutoring program for underprivileged children, is run primarily by spouses and children. Chiang's wife chairs it. His children volunteer as tutors.

In Chiang's words, "At a time when our society faces a loneliness epidemic, we're creating happiness and connection not just for members, but for their families. It's multilayered." And the results are not theoretical. Per-event participation has tripled. Membership is up 10% this year. They're already preparing to charter a sister club, Formosa Harmony, on the same model.

A club that asked what its community needed, named itself accordingly, and built itself around the answer. This is something we can do everywhere. If we are willing to change, we become more durable, not less.

You know, in Rotary, *no two clubs are alike*. No two projects are alike. No two members are alike. That variety — the sheer range of ways someone can show up and serve and

belong — is not incidental. It is the product. It is what we are offering the world. Our job is to make sure people know it.

Everyone in this room knows what the world needs. The only real question is whether we take with us what we have captured here and put it to work.

So, I want to leave you with three asks.

The first request: Share Rotary with someone. That means more than recruiting — it means sharing your experience. If you come across a story in *Rotary* magazine or on social media that might resonate with someone you know, share it. Or just tell them a story about why you keep showing up. Word of mouth is our number one driver of new members. And word of mouth begins with putting Rotary in the conversation. Maybe they join us. Maybe they tell someone else or just understand why you love Rotary. Both outcomes are worth the effort.

The next call to action: When you ask people to try Rotary, make sure you're offering a product that might interest them. The old rules don't always need to apply. Rotary clubs don't need to meet at the same times or follow the same formats. Experiment. In the House of Friendship and in breakouts, you've heard some new ideas. Some of what you hear might not sound like the Rotary you love or are used to. Don't take it personally, but do take it seriously. Remember our mission. That mission is belonging through purpose and the joy of being together while we pursue it. That is our *real* legacy.

And my third ask: Make the most of this convention. Listen and then lead. Use what you learn to increase member engagement. Our research shows that most of our member attrition happens in the first two years of membership. So, when a new member joins your club, give them an assignment. Make sure they are involved in something meaningful and appealing from day one. Because if we can engage and retain these members, we can grow exponentially. Most of these new members and unengaged members haven't attended a convention and maybe never will. So, think about how you can use what you learn here to educate and energize them. Listen to the great ideas all around you. Build new connections.

Then go home and, regardless of your role in your club, feel empowered to apply what you have learned. Let every member of your club share your eyes and ears. The more we see and the better we listen, the more we can do to help Rotary thrive.

You know, we have a great product to share. And we don't need permission to be proud of it. This is our opportunity, our future, our moment. So, let's seize it. Bubble tea didn't ask for permission — it found people who wanted to share and traveled on the strength of that alone. Rotary has been organizing that same human instinct for more than a century, across more than two hundred countries and geographic regions.

So, before you leave, remember a few things. We can be the people who notice the person eating dinner alone. We can be the people who ask the quiet or new member

what they need. We can be the people who carry the joy of Rotary out of this hall and into the places where loneliness has taken root.

And we can do what bubble tea did. Find someone, hand it to them, and say, "*Try this*."

Thank you, and enjoy the convention.