

## Speech at the General Assembly of the District Conference

Oct 10<sup>th</sup> 2015

By Dr. Ekkehart Pandel, representative of the RI president.

Dear Rotarian friends in district thirteen sixty

Yesterday I have had honor and privilege on behalf of RI-President Ravi Ravindran to greet you all in attending this excellent district conference. I'm sure we all have had a great afternoon and an inspiring evening yesterday – did you?

Today I would like to introduce some details of Ravi's ideas, visions and thoughts for his, for our current Rotary year.

In a best sense, Ravi is a double-faced man: on the one hand, he is a businessperson, extremely successful in Sri Lanka and worldwide. His special experience in this field influenced his ideas, his vision of Rotary. I will come back later to that.

However, most impressive for me he is a man of faith, close to a philosopher, highly devoted to his Hindu faith. Inspired as well as inspiring he gave us a great theme for his Rotary year: Be a gift to the world! Some time ago, I tried to analyze Rotary themes over the last years. It was easy to realize that themes of USA – or European Presidents has been mostly very pragmatically and action – orientated like Frank Devlyn's in two thousand "Create awareness – take action", Glenn Estess in two thousand four "Celebrate Rotary" or Ron Burton in two thousand thirteen "Engage Rotary, change life's". Themes of Presidents from Asia are often more contemplatively and thoughtful like "Sow the seeds of love" from Bichai Rattakul from Thailand in two thousand two, "Reach within to embrace humanity" from Kalyan Banerjee from India in two thousand twelve – and now this year "Be a gift to the world". And who could explain the meaning of his theme better than Ravi himself? I quote: "Every one of us has something to give – whoever we are, whatever our place in life. We can give our talent, our knowledge, our ability, and our effort; we can give our dedication and our devotion.

Through Rotary, we can take these gifts and make a genuine difference in the lives of others and in our world. Rotary is a way to bring out the best part of ourselves, and let it guide our lives. Too often, we spend our days in pursuit of the goals that matter least. We focus in our own achievements and our own gains; we devote endless energy to the accumulation of material things. Yet at the end of our lives, no one will remember us for the cars we drove, the clothes we wore or the titles we carried. In the end, our worth will be measured not by how much we acquired, but how much we gave away. Through Rotary we can leave behind something real and lasting. Our time is now. It will never come again. Therefore, "Be a gift to the world". I will ask you to give your faith, I will ask you to give your dedication, and I will ask you to give your commitment and your compassion. I will ask you for all these gifts. And I will ask you for more, even more than that. For I will ask you, in this Rotary year, not merely to give these gifts – but to be a gift yourself." End of quote.

Please follow me for a short moment in reflections of this message from RI President Ravi Ravindran. Because we are just at the beginning of our, of your Rotary year there will be time enough making this vision come true. There could be a project supporting a community in need, related to the six areas of focus of our Foundation; there could be a local project focused on disabled or needy persons. You could be intensively committed to your club members, engaged in friendship and communication enriching club meetings every week. Wearing our Rotary pin in public and showing your personal membership in our great organization would

be another opportunity to be more than a member. We should change ourselves from simple members to real Rotarians – that would be the richest gift!

Previously I talked about Ravi's double face. That means his action-orientated life as a successful businessperson. This compassion he put in his goals for his year as RI President. I know for sure he will only ask of us what he asks of himself. As a leader of a very successful company he knows – I quote again - :”My success – as RI President – depends on your success – as a governor - , yours depends on that of your club presidents, your club presidents, your club president's success depends on the work of their Rotarians. None of us can succeed alone. And so, everything I am to tell you, all of the changes I ask and expect of you, will apply equally to me”. End of quote. Therefore, I would like to discuss with you about vision, goals and challenges for all of us in this Rotary year. Because our time today is limited, I would like to confine myself to few key points related to my own experience in Rotary.

Like in every year since nineteen eighty-eight eradication of Polio will remain the first priority also in this year – every RI President must be existentially committed to our promise. As a pediatrician and last year member of the IPPC – the International PolioPlus Committee – this goal remains since years very close to my heart. You all know history probably very well. In the nineteen hundred eighties, there were more than three hundred fifty thousand cases of polio every year worldwide. This crippling disease, since years in Europe eradicated and therefore nearly forgotten and gone from public perception, remained every year thousands of disabled humans, especially children. As a member of GPEI – the Global Polio Eradication Initiative – Rotary International together with our partners World Health Organization, UNICEF, CDC and the Melinda and Bill Gates Foundation promised eradication of Polio and encouraged Rotarians worldwide every year again and again since nineteen hundred eighty-eight to support this campaign financially and personally. And that with tremendous success: the wild poliovirus exists today only in two countries, formerly one hundred twenty two. Remaining countries are Afghanistan and – most dangerous and endangered – Pakistan. India since three years, Nigeria, and subsequently entire Africa since one year are polio free.

At the end of September two thousand fifteen there are only thirty six cases worldwide compared with one hundred forty five cases last year – seven in Afghanistan and twenty nine in Pakistan. As you may be aware, unfortunately there are two cases recently reported from the Ukraine. However, these cases are vaccination related and different. Overall thanks Rotary and its tireless efforts in encouraging members year for year, sometimes almost ending patience, remains a tremendous success. Therefore, we are now, as you all know very well, “this close”. Yet the last step because of tremendous political difficulties in both of the very last endangered countries is most hard. Therefore, we need your support and all your energy for the end game phase. As we will meet the World Polio Day very soon please try to arrange polio related events in your clubs and perhaps in your community.

Our common success in eradication will be one of the greatest gift to the children of the world. Besides, it will be the best way creating awareness in public. In addition, of course, we need more publicity by doing good in the world. Above all, the main challenge for polio eradication concerns peace. Both remaining countries with endemic wild polio infections - Afghanistan and Pakistan – are highly endangered because of conflicts, religious fanaticism and civil war. Without peace and tolerance there will be no safety for vaccination teams, mothers and children. Therefore, we meet here our second main goal, Rotary's commitment to peace and conflict resolution. As you very well know peace and conflict resolution remain our main priority in our Foundation's six areas of focus for global grants. If there will be no peace in Afghanistan and Pakistan Polio will be a threat for the future, a threat even for Europe because an importation will be always possible. If there every child would be vaccinated with oral vaccine, we would have reached our goal much earlier. Therefore, the

eradication campaign needs our help, our financial support for at least three years. For two thousand eighteen the World Health Organization proclaimed the end game goal as possible. Please let us work together in clubs and districts to fulfill our promise.

And of course, not only for that reason Rotary needs members as much as possible. All our programs, all our projects, all goals of our Foundation depend on a high membership level. Every year every RI President is setting goals for membership growth. Ravi did the same but not announcing any request for numbers. In your District, there is a moderate membership growth, not very high, but much better than the permanent loss of members in other parts of the world. Therefore, you are on the right way, keep on going. Ravi for himself is looking for practical ways, best practices for attracting new and younger members. For this year, he launched a new benefit card. It will not be a physical membership card, but a mobile app supported by both Android and Apple operating systems, bringing all members discounts and offers from reputable services, establishments and organizations around the world. RI President does not expect or wish anyone to join Rotary only for this benefit. Of course, not every Rotarian in every part of the world will approve or even want to use this benefit and that is completely understandable, but many others perhaps are looking forward to such a program with great anticipation. For our part of the world, it means “Old Europe”, Rotary in my understanding is more than a “commercial” community. We are, I am sure, connected in friendship and trust, acting selflessly for service above self. May be such benefits are working very well in attracting members in other parts of the world and for that such a card will be absolutely acceptable. A follow-up evaluation will show success or failure – I am curious, but neutral.

Saying that, I ask you for your permanent service for Rotary. Success of your Governor, your district depends on your success as club presidents and, most important, club members as Rotarians and their, your commitment to Rotary. So please for this year be personally a gift to Rotary, but overall:

Be a gift to the world