Message from President Courtenay Thompson ~ April 2009

Certainly, a one year term in office is as much as most people could contemplate and I am very relieved to be facing my last quarter. At the start of the year, which was to be the first, building towards our centenary in 2011-12, in discussion with my President-Elect Arthur Boyd we were certain that if the Club was to enter its second century healthy and vibrant, there were two areas which we needed to emphasise above all others and those were actual membership and how we communicate with our members, Rotary International, and the public in general.

Are we moving in the right direction? The answer to that can only be answered by you the members, the Public and our colleagues in Rotary. I can only hope that at least we have made progress and by our centenary we will all know that we have won! Only then will I realise that being your leader, your mentor, hopefully your friend and on occasions your goal for one of those years, has been worthwhile.

I was very proud to enter our rejuvenated news sheet Flash into the RIBI competition for the best member's information news sheet/magazine. We may not have won on this occasion, but when I look at the difference between what we now have and the monochrome cream edition that made its first reappearance on the day I took office and the excellent all colour, in perfect Rotary livery, newsy and informative document that is circulated to all those members on email; today to Rosemary and Shane, we owe a great debt of gratitude. Well done!

I have severe reservations as to how I have communicated and conducted your meetings weekly; the whole idea of the new Club Leadership Plan is to make the Club far more inclusive so that you the members feel that it is your Club and it is you, all the members, who have made the decisions and it is you who buy into the Clubs plans and make them work. I know that this year we have had one of the finest programs of guest speakers, each challenging, each entertaining and well worth listening to and to Vice President Edwin we all should say a sincere thank you.

I hope our council meetings are gradually becoming more business like and that we are spending more time on policy issues and making suggestions as to the future of your Club. Do we really keep you, the members, informed of what is going on and appetise you sufficiently to maintain your commitment and want you to volunteer for those projects that you will enjoy being part of and deliver genuine benefits to the community we serve. I have my doubts.

Well how about progress in communicating with the public? At the start of my year, fantastic we had a new web site! A wonderful first step, by Norman Apsley and his staff at the Science Park, but I have been even more delighted by the incredible efforts by David Boyd and his partner Jenny, in expanding it and bringing it completely up to date. I hope every Rotarian spends a couple of minutes just seeing what a fantastic web site we now have and more importantly the incredible breadths of the program that the Rotary Club of Belfast runs. No excuses **www.belfastrotaryclub.com.** This must be one of the best communications tools any Club can have to our members, to fellow Rotarians and the public at large.

For the last three issues of COGS our Rotary District 1160 magazine we have had three articles published in each issue, perhaps not as leggy as the Clubs with fashion shows, but good stories of an active go ahead Club. Communications with the public, can do better. But we have made contact with our Regional/ National Newspaper and on the instruction of the newspapers chair have been allocated our own news reporter to follow our progress in Rotary Internationals drive to End Polio Now. So it is up to the Club to keep feeding him genuine stories of interest so we can keep our news stories in front of the public.

Membership, we have done well with our “Talking Heads” presentations on current affairs, Adrian Kerr has attracted 24 potential new members who are happy to call themselves ‘Friends of Belfast Rotary’, people who now have a very positive attitude to the activities the Club is involved in, would be happy to give us a hand on occasional projects but not yet ready to commit to joining. In addition we hope to have a number of new members joining us over the next few months. But even more important will be how, to make them feel welcome, understand how we operate, which activity is going to give them maximum satisfaction and above all make sure you and they enjoy a lot of good fellowship. RIBI has produced a marketing plan which will try to improve the perception of the public and in particular group ABC1 to have a more positive attitude to Rotary and to encourage them to the point where they are at least prepared to ask local Clubs about how to join Rotary. It is, I personally think, a little biased to the English market and does not answer the $64,000 question of how do the local Clubs answer the needs of younger and more energetic potential new members to our often staid and formal ways of conducting ourselves.

I cannot sing Marnette Lyons, Maurice Brooks, Brian Clements, Doris Houston and Trevor Hinds praise enough. To put on a world class event with the help of the Harvard Glee Club which went so smoothly, was musically perfection and raised so much money for Rotary International’s campaign End Polio Now was deserving of all our members, District 1160 and all the public who attended, very sincere thanks. We gave the kids from Highland Park a standing ovation for their very professional presentations they gave to the Club at our lunch on Monday 6th April, but to our own members who had organised that concert we should have given them one also. The Rotary Club of Belfast its best! As our own member PP Alan White in his letter of appreciation said, “It is one of those occasions when you have every right to be proud that you are also a member of that Club.”

Another land-mark event, which our Club has every right to be proud of our achievements is of course Towards A Better Understanding our joint project with Highland Park Rotary Club of Chicago. This year it is the turn of the brilliant young people from Highland Park High School to visit us and see how Belfast is approaching our historical problems and how our city has learned to look at conflict resolution and our cultural diversity. The kids are all fantastic as are the members of the Highland Park Rotary Club who are accompanying them, but we must not overlook and the Highland Park Club certainly have not overlooked the efforts of all the members of the Belfast Club who put so much work into putting on a superb program for our visitors, the home hospitality they receive, and the sessions they have with many of our prominent, citizens, our institutions and our politicians. All our members must really appreciate the gesture of the Highland Park Club in presenting two of our members with Paul Harris Fellowships with sapphire pins, Brian Byers and David Boyd. They and all the members of the Belfast Club who have fostered this program since 1992 all deserve recognition.

What have we coming up! We will have a Musical evening at Hillsborough Castle on 23rd April, an evening meeting with our Partners to greet RIBI President Ian Thompson at the start of his visit to District 1160 in the Europa Hotel on 28th April .We will be offering visits to the House of Lords and Seanad Eireann to all the Rotary Foundation Ambassadorial Scholars studying in Ireland. Our informal evening following the Presidents golf outing is on June 9th at Royal Belfast Golf Club and on the next day 10th June, Kids out Day, another very enjoyable and rewarding day spent with the young people of Mitchell House School, for children with disability. We are all looking forward to President Elect Arthur Boyd’s evening Club assembly on Monday 15th June. We propose to end the year with a drumming out dinner for this year’s President on the 4th July in the Long Gallery at Parliament Buildings Stormont when we will also be inducting our new President Arthur Boyd.

This will be a very special occasion in a very special venue so a full turnout would be welcomed.