

History

The world's first service club, the Rotary Club of Chicago, was formed on 23 February 1905 by Paul P. Harris, an attorney who wished to capture in a professional club the same friendly spirit he had felt in the small towns of his youth. The Rotary name derived from the early practice of rotating meetings among members' offices.

Rotary's popularity spread, and within a decade, clubs were chartered from San Francisco to New York to Winnipeg, Canada. By 1921, Rotary clubs had been formed on six continents. The organization adopted the Rotary International name a year later.

As Rotary grew, its mission expanded beyond serving club members' professional and social interests. Rotarians began pooling their resources and contributing their talents to help serve communities in need. The organization's dedication to this ideal is best expressed in its motto: Service Above Self.

By 1925, Rotary had grown to 200 clubs with more than 20,000 members. The organization's distinguished reputation attracted presidents, prime ministers, and a host of other luminaries to its ranks — among them author Thomas Mann, diplomat Carlos P. Romulo, humanitarian Albert Schweitzer, and composer Jean Sibelius.

The Four-Way Test

In 1932, Rotarian Herbert J. Taylor created The Four-Way Test, a code of ethics adopted by Rotary 11 years later. The test, which has been translated into more than 100 languages, asks the following questions:

Of the things we think, say or do

1. Is it the TRUTH?
2. Is it FAIR to all concerned?
3. Will it build GOODWILL and BETTER FRIENDSHIPS?
4. Will it be BENEFICIAL to all concerned?

Rotary and World War II

During World War II, many clubs were forced to disband, while others stepped up their service efforts to provide emergency relief to victims of the war. In 1942, looking ahead to the postwar era, Rotarians called for a conference to promote international educational and cultural exchanges. This event inspired the founding of UNESCO.

In 1945, 49 Rotary club members served in 29 delegations to the UN Charter Conference. Rotary still

actively participates in UN conferences by sending observers to major meetings and covering the United Nations in its publications.

"Few there are who do not recognize the good work which is done by Rotary clubs throughout the free world," former Prime Minister Winston Churchill of Great Britain once declared.

Dawn of a new century

As it approached the 21st century, Rotary worked to meet society's changing needs, expanding its service efforts to address such pressing issues as environmental degradation, illiteracy, world hunger, and children at risk.

In 1989, the organization voted to admit women into clubs worldwide and now claims more than 145,000 female members in its ranks.

After the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the dissolution of the Soviet Union, Rotary clubs were formed or re-established throughout Central and Eastern Europe. The first Russian Rotary club was chartered in 1990, and the organization underwent a growth spurt for the next several years.

More than a century after Paul Harris and his colleagues chartered the club that eventually led to Rotary International, Rotarians continue to take pride in their history. In honor of that first club, Rotarians have preserved its original meeting place, Room 711 in Chicago's Unity Building, by re-creating the office as it existed in 1905. For several years, the Paul Harris 711 Club maintained the room as a shrine for visiting Rotarians. In 1989, when the building was scheduled to be demolished, the club carefully dismantled the office and salvaged the interior, including doors and radiators. In 1993, the RI Board of Directors set aside a permanent home for the restored Room 711 on the 16th floor of RI World Headquarters in nearby Evanston.

Today, 1.2 million Rotarians belong to over 32,000 Rotary clubs in more than 200 countries and geographical areas.

Rotary's archives

Learn more about Rotary's history by [contacting the archives](#).