

Focus on Growth

Report from the CEO to the 2003 Congress

Number One Priority: Personal Sobriety

Sobriety is our priority both as individuals and as an organization. We cannot grow in influence as an organization – we cannot even survive – unless each of us maintains our personal sobriety. Our sobriety is the proof and the principal advertisement for our recovery concept. When a relapse occurs, it is a setback for the whole network. In the year ahead, we each as individuals and as an organization need to take whatever measures are necessary and consistent with our basic philosophy to strengthen our personal sobriety, and to make sure that we promptly and effectively address whatever issues threaten the sobriety of each and every member of our network.

Membership Survey. Toward that end, I support the proposal advanced by several members to conduct a membership survey. Let's set up a working committee to conduct a membership survey, to find out from our membership how well the meetings and other resources of LifeRing are working to support their sobriety, and what we could do as an organization to become more effective along this principal dimension.

Number One Organizational Priority: Growth

We are experiencing a modest net growth in the total number of face meetings and in the online presence. However, we remain a perilously small organization. In order to survive and to stabilize, we absolutely, urgently need to grow.

We also suffer from seriously uneven development. One local organization, the San Francisco Bay Area, currently has 24 face meetings and is growing. The nearest local organizations in meeting development are Madison WI and Middletown NY, each with three meetings. Most chapters in major cities outside Northern California are not growing and some are shrinking.

This disparity means, among other things, that one part of the organization is confronting relatively advanced practical issues such as office rental, fundraising, intergroup meetings, and the like, which are still remote from the radar screens of most of the other groups. This disparity creates tensions in many areas of our organizational life. We need urgently to focus internal discussion on this disparity, on the specific reasons why growth is not happening in certain areas, and on sharing best practices that yield organizational growth.

Directing the Internal Process Toward Growth

Very little of the internal online discussion during the past year has been concerned with or practically related to organizational growth issues. Sometimes it seemed that people were more interested in arguing about the rules than in playing the game.

Smoking. There is no good reason for the so-called nicotine debate to continue. The Board's resolution of this past summer has forged a workable consensus. Those who wish to quit smoking should do so. Quite a few members have done so or have put it on their personal recovery agendas. Education and support for voluntary smoking cessation will continue. Those who are opposed to nicotine cessation are free to ignore those efforts, but not to try to suppress them. The Board's resolution has worked well in practice; it is easy to implement and to explain to newcomers. There has been little if any difficulty with it in face-to-face meetings. We have many other issues that demand our attention now.

New List? It may be useful in the coming year to separate the current lsrcon list into two lists. I suggest we should consider starting a new list ("lsrpol"?) for general discussion of organizational politics, open to all members. The original lsrcon list would be limited to convenors or convenors-to-be. The convenor list would focus on convenor-to-convenor support and on sharing tools that bring and retain people at meetings and that make the organization grow.

Newsletter. At last year's Congress, the delegates unanimously approved a proposal to launch a print Newsletter. Unfortunately there was insufficient follow-through on the initial enthusiasm behind this venture. Happily this year there is a newer and more broadly supported effort behind the Newsletter venture, and this deserves the support of the whole organization. The Board of Directors ought to put the Newsletter as a priority item on the agenda of its meeting immediately post-Congress. A print Newsletter can be not only a tool to broaden and deepen our internal process but also a potent tool for outreach and expansion.

We have a wealth of members who, by their energy and ability, can be engines for organizational growth. We need to clear the track for them and give them the green light and the guidance and support to do what we all know urgently needs doing.

Re the Proposed Bylaws Amendments

Two years ago, the founding Congress carefully drafted a constitution for LifeRing, the Bylaws. The Bylaws were the result of many months of discussion and debate. It was a great privilege to be among the signers of this original Charter of LifeRing Secular Recovery. All of us who were present felt what a potentially historic moment it was.

In my opinion the founding Congress did its work well. Of course, we did not intend our work to be set in cement; we foresaw that practical experience would call for refinements and improvements, and in fact the Berkeley Congress of 2002 adopted

two such useful, experience-based amendments.

This year a great number of amendments is being proposed. Large portions of the original Bylaws would be replaced, and some of the amendments would result in major structural changes in the way we govern ourselves. I refer particularly to proposals to take the supreme legislative power of LifeRing Secular Recovery out of the hands of the annual Congress as it is presently constituted – as a meeting of people who meet face to face – and move it to the online arena, into the hands of people whom no one sees.

I have been active in the online arena since before there was a LifeRing. I am webmaster of unhooked.com, moderator of several lists, host of two chats, and a prolific online participant. I am no Luddite. But I strongly oppose this proposed structural amendment. It is unworkable, inequitable, and unnecessary.

- The notion of holding a Congress business meeting by email is unworkable. Your Board of Directors recently attempted to hold its own business meeting of only seven persons via an exchange of emails. Under optimum network conditions, the process was frustratingly slow and chaotic. Business that should have taken minutes took hours. When there were even minor network delays no work could get done and we were forced to abandon the experiment. With any larger number of participants no business meeting could be completed in a realistic time frame. Like so many other geek-utopian slogans of the bygone dot.com era, the notion of an “Online Congress” sounds nice but fails the test of actual practice.
- The proposal to shift all legislative power online is not only unworkable, it is inequitable. By far the majority of LifeRing participants do not participate online and would be effectively disenfranchised by the proposal. The proposed amendment will be seen as a power grab by an affluent technological elite, to the detriment of those on the dark side of the Digital Divide. It could provoke a powerful backlash against the online community, and lead to a reconsideration of the innovative decision that we reached only very recently to afford online groups voting parity with face meetings.
- Finally, the proposal to eviscerate the present Congress procedure is unnecessary. The existing system may not give every individual the political outcome they want, but it gives every participant the opportunity to have their views considered. Our present system, based on a very conventional, traditional model of an annual Congress of people meeting face to face, is certainly not perfect, but there are centuries of experience behind it. We should welcome amendments that arise from demonstrated practical need and that would improve the process, but we need to resist the call to scrap the foundations that we just lovingly erected at our founding Congress two years ago.

Our annual face Congresses can be a powerful engine for growth. When they are held

in a community setting, when there is a program and speakers that attract recovering people and treatment professionals, when we do vigorous publicity and outreach, then our face Congresses not only energize the ranks of our membership, they build the reputation of LifeRing in the recovery communities and help both our face meetings and our online presence to expand and become more solid.

Board Procedures. Our Board of Directors at this coming Congress will just be completing the gradual transition set out in our Bylaws from a self-selected to a democratically elected board. The members of the Board are prominently identified on our web site and their email addresses are posted. Any online member who wishes to bring an issue to the attention of the Board can easily do so. We should add the members' snail mail addresses and telephone numbers. Any member who wished to attend a Board meeting this past year has been welcome. In actual practice so far there has been almost no membership interest expressed in attending Board meetings. However, I believe I speak for the whole Board when I say that the Board is open to and interested in suggestions for improving its process and for stimulating more members to take an interest in Board deliberations. The Board needs to be open to membership input in order to play a more vigorous leadership role in making this organization grow.

Key to Organizational Growth: Convenor Development

Organizational growth is a many-sided process. At this stage, the key link to organizational growth is convenor development. The number one complaint about LifeRing: "Not Enough Meetings" translates fundamentally into "Not Enough Convenors." In the San Francisco Bay Area, we could have at least four additional meetings next week if we had convenors ready to lead them. Nationwide, the example of Madison WI and Middletown NY, each with three face meetings, demonstrates what a difference it can make even in a small town when you have one or two energetic convenors at work.

For most of the past year I have put my main focus into trying to sum up the practical experience of attending more than a thousand LifeRing meetings in the form of a convenor's guidebook. I posted the first draft of this effort on the unhooked.com web site for feedback in September 2002. The book is currently titled *How Was Your Week? How People Make Their Recoveries in LifeRing Meetings, A Convenor's Handbook*. The other day after a meeting one member grabbed my arm and said, "Marty, I'd like to become a convenor when I have my six months. What should I read to get myself ready for that?" *How Was Your Week* is the answer to that question. There's enough practical and theoretical material in the book to get a person started as a LifeRing convenor.

Six months ago if Time magazine or Oprah had featured LifeRing it would have been a disaster for us. Hundreds of people would have started LifeRing meetings without much of a clue as to what happens there or what they are about. They would have folded as quickly as they started. Media coverage can burn out and crater an

organization if it is not ready. I've seen it happen. For this reason, at the 2002 Congress I discouraged members from seeking immediate national publicity for LifeRing. When *How Was Your Week* is ready for general distribution, I believe that we may be ready for the media glare if it should happen to us. If hundreds of people pop up wanting to start LifeRing meetings, we will then have a tool to put into their hands to get them started.

Creating Public Opinion for Growth

One of the suggestions I hear most frequently from members is to do more media outreach. What have we done to contact TV personality X or newspaper columnist Y or radio host Z with the LifeRing message? Some energetic members have made such contacts as individuals. Other members deprecate media outreach efforts, citing the AA motto, "attraction rather than promotion." It is high time that we tackled this question of media outreach in an organized fashion.

Media Committee. I would like to see volunteers step forward to be on a media outreach committee. The committee's job would be, first, to consider whether media outreach is consistent with our philosophy. Toward that end the committee should solicit the widest possible input from the membership, and report the results to the Board. If a consensus develops that media outreach in some form is legitimate, the committee then should get to work and do whatever media outreach is within our capabilities.

Cultivating Referral Sources for Growth

In order to reach the people we serve, it is essential to have good referral relationships with professionals in chemical dependency, mental health, and other health care fields. Meetings that enjoy good referral relationships with professionals will have a steady influx of newcomers.

The 2002 Congress in Berkeley saw a breakthrough in our relationships with treatment professionals. For the first time LifeRing became a donor of Continuing Education Units for substance abuse counselors. The buzz from that Congress, reinforced by several targeted mailings from the Service Center, has created a steadily warmer climate of acceptance for LifeRing. We are receiving more invitations to send LifeRing speakers to address patients and staff from more programs and more different kinds of programs than ever before.

Professional Advisory Board. At the present rate of progress, we will soon have enough recognition and respect in the treatment community to invite treatment professionals to lend their names and counsel to a Professional Advisory Board. During the coming year I would ask all members who have personal contacts with treatment professionals, especially prominent names, to sound them out informally regarding possible service on such a body. If we get enough of a response, then I

would make a formal proposal to the Board, subject to ratification at the following Congress, to create a Professional Advisory Board. Such boards have no voting powers and are purely advisory, perhaps even ornamental. Yet the names of well-known treatment professionals on such a Board will at a minimum help LifeRing gain more acceptance in the professional communities ... and more referrals to LifeRing meetings.

Building the Infrastructure for Growth

So far, LifeRing has had the appearance of having a regular national office, without the reality. The LifeRing national mailing address, the phone line, fax line, and office machinery (computer, printer, scanner, copier, postage meter, scales, paper folder, files) have been housed in and shared with the law office of the current CEO. Our book warehouse is the garage of the current CFO. This state of affairs recalls the earliest days of the personal computer industry when the business was run out of the founders' garages.

Office. It is time to move from appearance to reality. My law office lease will be ending soon and I am moving my law office home at the end of March. The LifeRing Service Center and LifeRing Press will need to acquire their own office space just like a regular "grown up" organization. An informal search committee has located several likely and affordable office spaces. We have the funds out of our current income to pay rent and ordinary office expenses. Therefore, pending the Board's approval, LifeRing will very soon have an office of its own, with our name on the door – a space that is no one's private property, but that truly belongs to the organization as a whole.

Service Center. The LifeRing Service Center's mission statement is short and sweet: "Serve the Meetings." Toward that end, the Service Center volunteers have responded to hundreds of phone calls, faxes, emails and letters from all over the country seeking information and referrals. Whenever possible we refer people to existing convenors in the nearest location to the caller. The Service Center, in conjunction with the Press, also creates and distributes brochures, flyers, and schedules. We mail LifeRing literature around the country, and we can be particularly helpful in promoting new meetings when called upon. On request we compile lists of referral sources in any given US locality, construct a mailing list, and send out a targeted mailing of LifeRing literature together with local meeting announcements.

The LifeRing Service Center is also the bookkeeping and accounting center for the organization. The periodic Financial Reports are generated here, and the underlying records and bank accounts are maintained here.

The Service Center also handles requests for LifeRing speakers, organizes periodic convenor workshops, keeps meetings supplied with literature, books and other needs, and takes a hand in organizing social events open to the recovery community.

Web Sites. The LifeRing web sites are the Service Center's responsibility. Since the '02 Congress, the national meeting list on unhooked.com has been updated more than fifty times, not to mention the many dozens of enhancements and additions in other areas. Quite a few face meetings around the country, and all of the online meetings, can point to unhooked.com as a source of newcomer referrals. We owe special thanks to John R. of Telford PA, who has brought his design and technical expertise to unhooked.com this year. Many other contributors deserve thanks in this area. The web sites are truly a product of our entire global village. It is gratifying to see the continual growth in the number of visitors to unhooked.com, as mentioned in the Board report.

The Press. LifeRing Press at this time is not only an editorial operation but also performs order fulfillment, including accounting, shipping, and customer service. The Press and the Service Center share the same office space and are in many respects merely two aspects of the same integrated service operation. We ship books to meetings, to amazon.com, to institutions, and to individuals who order them. LifeRing Press is the major revenue center of the organization at this time. As the Financial Report submitted by CFO Marjorie Jones indicates, the Press currently generates about nine out of every ten dollars of our national net income.

Finding the Money for Growth

As we acquire our own office space for the Press and the Service Center, we will need to acquire our own office equipment, particularly a high-speed printer, copier, postage meter, and other mailing equipment.

As we focus on growth, we will also need to devote more resources to convenor development. We will want to hold convenor workshops that serve the meetings and prospective meetings in the whole country, particularly in areas whose development still lags behind.

All of this will cost money.

Financial Development Committee. We are privileged to have among our members a small number who have experience in fundraising for nonprofits, and who are willing – even enthusiastic – to put their expertise to work for the organization they love. I will be asking the Board to set up a Financial Development Committee and to call on additional experienced members to volunteer for this area. The mission of the committee initially will be exploratory: to do research and to find out whether there are philanthropic resources that may be available for specific LifeRing projects. Fundraising for nonprofits generally is extremely difficult in the present economic climate, and we do not have high expectations. We have no interest in becoming dependent on outside funding and we have no need to go there. But if it is possible to obtain no-strings grants for office equipment and for one-time events such as convenor workshops – as our members with expertise in this area firmly believe –

then this is something we ought to know about and to seriously consider. The Financial Development Committee also ought to look at the present state of internal funding in the LifeRing network and make reports and recommendations to the Board and the membership in this area.

Conclusion: Each Individual Makes a Difference

Organizational growth is the number one priority of the Service Center and of the Press. But growth cannot be driven from the center alone. Organizational growth is every member's responsibility. Every member needs to start looking outward and to ask themselves:

- What can I do today to bring at least one new person to a LifeRing meeting?
- What can I do today to contribute to starting at least one new LifeRing meeting in my community?
- What can I do today to get the word out to referral sources, to the recovery community, and to the general public about the merits of the LifeRing road to recovery?

One of the privileges of being a member of a new and small organization such as ours is that individual efforts can make a world of difference. The fact that we have 24 public face meetings in the San Francisco Bay Area is attributable to a string of individual initiatives. A series of individuals, such as current Congress delegates Bill S., Marjorie J., Gillian E., Chet G., and many others who are not here today, made the decision to start a new meeting, and went ahead and did whatever it takes to make that happen. You can see from the example of other areas such as Madison and Middletown, each now with three face meetings – and from the example of C.A. in Hokkaido, Japan -- what a tremendous difference the individual energy of one or a handful of convenors can make. These kinds of individuals are the models that all of us need to emulate in the year ahead.

The LifeRing concept is a good vision. It's simple, it's powerful, and it meets a real need in today's recovery community. We are no longer merely an "anti" group; we have an affirmative roadmap to recovery that can appeal to and serve a mainstream recovery audience. If we build it, they will come. In this coming year, let's focus on growth. And above everything, let's all stay clean and sober.

Respectfully submitted,
Marty Nicolaus
2/26/03