



2006 LifeRing Congress Annual Report

"Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed people can change the world. Indeed, it is the only thing that ever has." -- Margaret Mead

In February 2001, a couple of dozen thoughtful, committed people gathered in a rural retreat center in Brooksville, near Tampa, Florida, and formally constituted LifeRing Secular Recovery as a national organization. As we gather here in Berkeley today, five years later, we should take a few moments and review where we started from and how far we have come.

- A key measure of our progress is the number of meetings. At the time of the founding congress we counted at most 35 meetings nationwide. Currently we have more than 100.
- Then, we had no meetings outside of the U.S. Today LifeRing has a presence in two provinces of Canada and in one province of Japan. There is a European Information Centre in Ireland, and some LifeRing materials are or soon will be available in French, Spanish, and German.
- In the San Francisco Bay Area we had approximately 12 meetings in 2001. We could still list all the meetings in a prerecorded telephone message. Today there are 40.
- Then, we published a Bay Area meeting schedule once or twice a year. Now, we publish the schedule almost monthly.
- In early 2001, the unhooked.com website consisted of about 100 pages. Today there are three connected websites (lifering.com and lifering.org as well as unhooked.com) consisting of nearly 1,900 pages with nearly 1,400 pictures, connected by more than 17,000 hyperlinks, totaling more than 177 megabytes of content, plus half a dozen independent local or regional websites, such as the new trilingual LifeRing Europe website based in Ireland.
- We had two email lists at the time of the founding congress; today there are a dozen.

Our chat rooms have weathered a series of changes and crashes and have emerged with a new technology and a new format; they are busier and more useful than ever before.

- At the time of the founding Congress, our main publication was the Keepers book. The first edition of Presenting LifeRing Secular Recovery had just come off the press. Today, the second edition of the Presenting book is nearly exhausted and a third edition is in the wings.
- For a convenor's handbook in 2001, we were using an outdated 50-page photocopied pamphlet with a stapled-on blue cover. Today, the 250-page How Was Your Week handbook has completely replaced the old pamphlet.
- The workbook in 2001 was in a brown-covered beta edition produced at a copy shop, and we were unsure whether or not there was a market for it. Today, Recovery By Choice is in its second printing. It is selling steadily. It is a major source of revenue for our service operations. It is being adopted as a text by a growing number of institutions ranging from the Royal Australian Air Force clinic to the Schick-Shadel Hospital in Seattle to the Las Vegas DUI court, among others. It will have to go to a third printing later this year or early the next at the present pace.
- We now have our first audiovisual product, the new LifeRing 101 CD, produced through the energy and initiative of a member of the LifeRing network in Western Australia.
- In 2001, we had three brochures: Sobriety is Our Priority, Secular is Our Middle Name, and Self-Help Is What We Do. Today, we have those and five more: LifeRing Online, We Come Recommended, Give Something Back, Food for the Sober Mind, Welcome to LifeRing, and If This Is Day One.

- Five years ago, the Service Center in Oakland had no independent existence. It was just an answering machine and a file drawer in the CEO's law office. Today, the LifeRing Service Center has its own separate office, and we are about to sign on for another three-year lease.
- Today, the LifeRing Service Center and LifeRing Press have an 800 phone line, a folding machine, a tabbing machine, a custom database, specialized mass mailing software, and two laser printers capable of duplex printing. We had none of that at the time of the founding congress.
- At the time of the founding Congress, LifeRing Press was shipping books against invoices and receiving payment by check or money order. We had to write off a lot of uncollectibles. Today, practically all of our sales are via credit card over the Internet, and we rarely have a bad debt.
- We remain financially independent and self-sustaining. Thanks to our all-volunteer operational model, we are able to devote virtually all of our energies to providing services, and a relatively small fraction of our efforts to fundraising and administrative overhead.
- Today, the charitable IRS treatment (501.c.3.) that we only had provisionally in 2001 has been confirmed and made permanent. Our federal trademark registrations for LIFERING SECULAR RECOVERY, LIFERING RECOVERY, and LIFERING PRESS, newly minted five years ago, have now been renewed and made incontestable.
- We have had Congresses every year: two in Brooksville, three in Berkeley, and one in Guelph, Ontario, Canada. Organizing annual conferences is no mean feat, and the organization deserves great credit for sustaining this effort. Our guest speakers and audience members have done a great deal to raise the profile of the LifeRing network.
- Our Board of Directors, which was still two-thirds self-selected in 2001, has meanwhile become fully elective. Each vacancy has been quickly filled. This year we have a proposed Bylaws amendment to expand the Board to nine persons. We will have our first Board workshop directly after this Congress.
- We have begun regular monthly convenor workshops at the Service Center in Oakland, sharing best practices and counteracting convenor isolation and burnout.
- We have completed our first ever Membership Survey and learned a great deal about who we are and how we got here. The survey has helped the public to get to know us better, and has helped to dispel common misconceptions about us.
- At the time of the founding congress, we had almost zero outreach. Outside a couple of treatment centers in the San Francisco Bay Area, and on the Internet, our name was unknown. Today, we remain probably the best kept secret in recovery, but we do have some progress to show:
- LifeRing has been mentioned in four separate articles in professional journals read by treatment counselors, including one feature article co-authored by well-known recovery historian William L. White.
- LifeRing now has an article in Wikipedia, the online encyclopedia that is one of the busiest sites on the Internet, thanks mainly to the energy and initiative of a member of the LifeRing network in New York City.
- Coverage about LifeRing has appeared in local print media and/or radio and TV in the San Francisco Bay Area, Seattle, Guelph Ontario, and Vancouver BC Canada.
- LifeRing convenors have given dozens of presentations to audiences of recovering people and treatment professionals. New audiences are discovering us, such as DUI treatment programs, countywide mental health professionals, adolescent recovery programs,

and last year's national conference in New York about the role of religion in recovery.

- We receive far more telephone inquiries at the Service Center and far more Internet hits on unhooked.com than in previous years. LifeRing has just been selected by a major Internet search engine to receive free public service ads.
- We are far more active and effective with outreach by direct mail than we imagined in Brooksville Florida five years ago. Instead of one-shot flyers to general audiences, we have crafted a six-piece series targeted at treatment professionals, aimed to build referrals for local LifeRing meetings. We can do much more.
- We are now actively collecting and publicizing Lifering participants' testimonials as a way of attracting new members. After five years as a national organization, we have a credible base of participants whose personal testimonials are entitled to consideration and deserving of a wider audience.

In short, we have come a long way in the five years since our founding congress, and we have a lot to be proud of. Consider also that we have survived and grown during a period in our national political and cultural climate that is probably more hostile to new approaches in recovery than any in memory. However, we have no grounds whatever for complacency. We remain a perilously small organization, we remain on the margins of our field, and we operate with a limiting business model. Even at our current scale of operation, we face significant challenges that will stretch us to capacity.

For several years now it has been clear that the major obstacles to our growth are internal rather than external. It used to be the case that we had a surplus of enthusiastic, capable organizers, relative to the demand for what we had to offer. The doors of the treatment profession and the ears of the recovery community were closed to us, as they are to anything new and unfamiliar. Today, we have more enthusiastic, capable organizers than ever, but far too few of them relative to the increased demand. More

and more referral sources have heard of LifeRing and are interested in and open to what we do. The recovery community has begun to know and accept LifeRing, and we are getting referrals not only from old-line treatment professionals but even from within the 12-step organizations. At the Service Center, our greatest pain a few years ago was not getting callbacks from treatment programs. We still have some of those problems. But a far more frequent and more painful experience these days is having to tell inquiring professionals and people in recovery from throughout the U.S. and other countries, "Sorry, we don't have a meeting in your area yet." By far the most frequent complaint about LifeRing in our recent nationwide membership survey was "not enough meetings!"

More meetings means, fundamentally, more convenors. People in recovery who are ready, willing, and able to give something back – these are the engine that drives the growth of the LifeRing network. Where we have at least one energetic, stable, capable, and motivated convenor in a town, there LifeRing meetings start up, take root, grow and mentor new convenors, spin off new meetings, and gradually become a transforming presence in the community. Where convenors are lacking, or where they are not solid in their own recoveries, or where they lack ability, energy, or motivation, where they see themselves as bolted-down fixtures in their meetings rather than as Johnny Appleseeds, where they don't practice "passing it on," where they don't cultivate their referral sources, there the meetings stagnate or wither away and the organization dies a lingering death. We can see examples of both patterns in the San Francisco Bay Area and in other places nationwide. One of the functions of our annual Delegates' Assemblies is to shed a bright light on our convenor practices so that we can all see and evaluate and learn and improve.

This year we are dedicating our entire Congress to convenor development. Unlike the Berkeley Congresses of 2002 and 2004 and last year's Guelph Congress, which were primarily dedicated to outreach, this one is focused on in-reach. The keys to the progress of the LifeRing network, just like the keys to our personal so-

briety, lie within us. To be sure, external conditions continue to shape us and limit us. But we are not empty-handed and powerless. We have a good array of tools now for reaching out to others: we have handouts, we have web sites, we have the workbook, the convenor's handbook, the Presenting book, the new CD, and much more. The real challenge is whether we have it within us to pick up the tools and use them; whether we can find within us the power and the will to reach out to others in recovery and be a support to them, in the same way that others have been a support for us.

Recovery is not just an internal process, nor is it just something that comes from outside. Recovery comes from connecting the inside with the outside in a new, sober, productive, and energizing way. The power flows from the connectedness. Each of us who has succeeded in our recoveries as part of the LifeRing network is a proof of this principle, and is a beneficiary of this web of connections and a living part of it. That is why our term "convenor" is so apt: it means people who build connections between people.

Now the question is whether we as individuals will become nodes or terminators of this web. If we only receive, but do not transmit; if we only take but do not give; if we only consume but do not produce; if the connections stop with us, then we are terminators of the network. In order for this network to grow, all of us need to become living nodes: connectors that both receive and transmit, that not only take but also give, that not only consume but also produce, that not only reflect but also shine, that reach out and touch new people and go to new places, speak new words, carve out new pathways, build new bridges, create new choices, pour new energy, and shed new sunshine on this old, tired, sick, stale and stuck recovery universe. That is the challenge before us.

We have over the years built up some valuable outreach capacity in the LifeRing Service Center. But it should be completely clear to everyone that this is not enough. It's not just that our staff of volunteers is tiny and our equipment is primitive. Even with a bigger staff and better equipment, it would not be enough. Organiza-

tional growth is never just a matter of answering phone calls, updating web sites, filling book orders, and pushing out mailings. It's a matter of people building relationships with people. Every member of the network needs to be an ambassador to the world. Even though we are secular, we can be and need to be evangelists and missionaries.

Some time ago, someone floated the idea that LifeRing should add a fourth "S" to our three basic principles of Sobriety, Secularity, and Self-Help, namely Service. The proposal did not catch on. It sounds too much like those other groups we all know about. Service should be a matter of individual choice, not of binding principle. True and very true. But if we have learned anything over the past five years of our existence as a national organization, it is that we survive and we grow when and where we act as if that fourth S were just as important as the other three.

What really is the difference between being a LifeRing member and a LifeRing convenor? It's practicing the fourth S, passing it on, giving something back, being of service to others. Our growth and success as an organization for the next five years depend vitally on the extent to which we can inspire each and every member, as far as is practical for them, to think of themselves as a convenor, to do convenor things, and to aspire to and prepare for the role of full-fledged convenor as soon as possible.

If we could reduce this complex, many-faceted, extremely challenging task to a single slogan, it would be this. As LifeRing enters the next five years of our existence as a national organization, our motto should be: **Every Member a Convenor.**

-- Marty N.
3/20/06