LABYRINTHS

Labyrinths are a symbol of journey and spiritual renewal first appearing in Egypt and what is now central Italy around 4500 BCE. There is evidence that they were built at entrances of tombs to keep them free of evil spirits.

Other places and times where there was evidence of labyrinths:
- Nazcan civilization 500 BCE in southwestern Peru. Colorful pottery found in this area often depicts labyrinths.
- The Hopi Indians of North America used a symbol known today as the “seven-path labyrinth”.
- There is evidence of crude stone labyrinths on the coasts of the Baltic and White Seas, designed and built by early Lapps.

Many Christian labyrinths appear relatively late in history, around the 20th century. The first labyrinth in a Christian church appeared in the fourth century. When Christians could no longer make physical pilgrimages to their spiritual home in Jerusalem, they walked a symbolic pilgrimage on a labyrinth built in to the floor of the nave of a cathedral. They turned a physical journey in to a spiritual journey.

To early Christians the labyrinth symbolized many things.
- Some thought that if they could not get to Jerusalem, they made believe that they were walking to Jerusalem on the Labyrinth.
- Going into the labyrinth also symbolized a trip to the underworld, and the trip was a resurrection; heaven and hell are both invoked in its pattern.
- Some thought the labyrinth to represent the soul’s journey to Christ.

One of the most famous Christian Labyrinths that is still intact is found on the floor of the Chartres cathedral in France. The circle on the floor repeats the pattern of the stained-glass circle of the western rose window. This window symbolizes heaven with Christ at the center surrounded by four rings with twelve circles in each. Twelve is the number of Apostles. When the sun hits the window, which is composed of nothing but colored lights, it cases its image down to the earth and the maze.

Not all labyrinths are the same. They take on many shapes and forms. They are as different as the cultures and as wide ranging as the early artists who drew them from someplace inside themselves and their picture of the world.

Why walk the labyrinth today?
Perhaps Saint Augustine said it best, “all problems can be solved by a walk”.

In walking
- we link with other cultures and eras
- We link body and soul
- We simultaneously have a physical and spiritual experience
The journey is one foot after another, and it is a path to the holy place inside of us
- There are no wrong turns in the labyrinth. You always get home and there are no wrong uses of them. They are a form of spiritual travel.
- We walk in, we walk out. We coil and we uncoil. We do so both physically and spiritually. No matter how on the outside you feel, you can always get in.
- The labyrinth has only one path so there are no tricks and no dead ends. It confirms our faith that hope exists in the universe.

From ancient times, the labyrinth was associated with pilgrimage routes and rituals of self-discovery. Labyrinths serve as time windows or portals where time stands still so that we can remember what we are doing. Daily life can be chaotic; labyrinths are a hopeful sign of order during these times.

People make labyrinths everywhere
- outdoors with bricks or stones setting the path
- On the beach in the sand
- In the snow
- In grass or flowers
- on mats that can unroll indoors in large spaces like gymnasiums
- with strips of cloth that can be laid out

There is a family who lives on many acres who recreated the labyrinth of Chartres in their back yard with a lawn mower. They placed a large rock in the center. Friends, family and neighbors use it. Children run and sing in it. People walk it; some going to sit on the rock and pray.

Sometimes all we need is right at home; we don’t have to go away to find that out. The labyrinth leads us back to where we started, but as a different person. We go to the center, therefore becoming centered with our bodies, our minds, our lives and our world.

Many of us are paralyzed by confusion. We flit; having what Buddhist mediators call “monkey mind”. We wander from one room to another, looking for our lost glasses, car keys, or the telephone. The confusion is not necessary. Labyrinths help bring us order. They calm, clarify and focus.

Walking the labyrinth is not about escaping unto the center and leaving the world, it is about experiencing the Spirit in the center so that you can live in the world in a more blessed way.
- The journey inward prepares you for the journey outward
- The inward path prepares you for the experience of the center
- The outward path prepares you for your life in the world

The choice is ours. Life can be lived as a maze with confusions, wrong turns, dead ends, false hopes or a labyrinth with its many turnings, but none of them wrong, a path with sure and certain knowledge of reaching and experiencing the center.

Labyrinths are a form of prayer – a body prayer.
Preparation
- dress comfortably
- Prepare your mind by consciously putting away those things that may prevent you from the full experience.
- You may want to choose a piece of your favorite scripture, mantra, or psalm
- Some like to sit or lie down when they get to the center – so you may want to place a pad or pillow there.
- A prayer of invocation are generally said before to call God to be present with you. Example, “Come, Holy Spirit”.

The Path Inward
- As your feet touch the path, be aware of the path.
- With each step take a deep breath to allow you to go deeper and deeper in to the center.
- There is no right or wrong way to do it – just walk slowly and focus on your path.
- Repeat your mantra or psalm if you’d like

Reaching the Center
- The center is a great place to meditate. Take your time there.
- Try to empty your mind of all thoughts during this meditative time to make space for the Holy Spirit. This makes sense because when we fill our lives up with clutter – there is very little space left for the Holy Spirit.

The Path Outward
- Leave when you are ready
- Notice how light your body feels, how relaxed you are
- As you take your journey back out in to the world, take the gift that you have learned with you back to your day to day life.
- The gift could be in the form of something you are going to do for the greater good. You already are a gift that God has given to the world.
- The labyrinth will help you recognize your gifts.
- By you using these gifts you will better the world
- As you step out say a prayer of thanksgiving.