

The History of the Labyrinth

The Christian Tradition of the Labyrinth

When it became impossible to travel to Jerusalem, Rome appointed seven cathedrals to become the "New Jerusalem" for pilgrimages. The Chartres labyrinth was part of this tradition, but it might well have had its origin in the neo-Platonic school of Christian philosophy that was founded there in the fifth century.

The labyrinth played a role in Christian practice for several hundred years, but eventually was all but forgotten. Then, in about 1990, it was rediscovered, along with its role in meditation. Since then, hundreds of labyrinths have been constructed around the world. The one at First Central is the first church labyrinth in Nebraska.

How is the labyrinth used in meditation?

The labyrinth is only a tool, not a sacred device. In addition to its use as a metaphor for a pilgrimage, there are many other ways to use the labyrinth. For example, some use the labyrinth as a prayer path, and use it to talk to God. Others begin the walk by focusing on an important question that they need to consider. They often find clues to the puzzle at the center. You may feel free to find your own way to use this unique spiritual ritual.

The two traditional paths to the Sacred, to the Center.

The Apopathic Path is the path through silence. This is a path of "nothingness" related to the Zen concept of nothingness. The silence within is a door to God and the soul, but it requires patience and perhaps a long wait before discovering it. Patience and time are qualities that are hard for some of us to find in our lives.

The Kathopathic Path uses the processes of our own imagination to yield new insights to the sacred. Some may be familiar with the modern use of guided imagery in meditation. The labyrinth walk uses the same technique of emptying our minds of extraneous thought in order to make us receptive to new images of the divine.

The Three-Fold Mystical Path

The monastic method of using the labyrinth was to incorporate the Three-Fold Mystical Path of Christianity. The three stages of this method are Purgation, Illumination, and Union.

Stage 1: Purgation

Purgation is the first stage, the path to the center. This is the emptying, cleansing, and letting go of the world in order to be ready for what God has to offer in the center. In our hurried and complex modern world, this shedding of our burdens can be very important, and the walk can become a reliable tool to help us temporarily release the worldly obligations of life.

Stage 2: Illumination

Illumination is the second stage, in the center. The labyrinth contains so many turns and changes of direction that the arrival at the center is often something of a surprise. Here is where you are to be ready to receive whatever God has for you. Be receptive to "the still small voice" of God. Some find it useful to pause at each of the petals of the center rose for prayer and receiving God. Union is the final stage, the path outward, to the world. The gift of a mystical, direct connection with God is not complete unless it is balanced with an application to life and to society. The grounded feeling that comes to us at this stage allows us to "chop wood and carry water" with new insight and new confidence about our lives.

Stage 3: Quieting and emptying of the mind

Perhaps the most important, but most difficult, goal of meditation is the quieting and emptying of the mind. Thoughts race through our heads all day, and even part of the night in our sleep. The very idea of "not thinking" is impossible to imagine! But throughout the history of both Western and Eastern religions, the emptying of the mind and discovery of "nothingness" has been key to mystic union with God. If you find yourself in the center of the labyrinth with a thought, rest assured that your meditation has not failed. In fact, it may have succeeded beyond the scope of your imagination. Entry into the "cloud of unknowing" and experiencing nothingness" is a gift. Many religions and Christian mystics equate this state with being in the presence of God. What we experience as nothing is actually everything!

Instructions and Etiquette for the walk

Pause at the beginning. Settle your mind and focus. If others are present, you may want to let the person in front make a turn or two to allow them and yourself more personal space. Find your own pace. Part of the "magic" of the labyrinth is in the rhythm of the constantly turning path. If you find someone close behind you, step aside at one of the turns and let them pass.

Remember, the path is only thirteen inches wide, and it goes both ways. If you meet someone who is on the way out, make room for them, but try not to make body contact, which could interfere with their meditation. Of course, if you know them, a touch of a hand or a hug can be very important.

Members of all faiths and beliefs are welcome and can find meaning in walking the labyrinth. The labyrinth at First Central is open for meditation 24 hours a day.

Parking during business hours is available in the lot on the east side of the church. On weekends and evenings parking is available in the lot across the street on the west.

Learn more about the labyrinth

If you would like to know more about the use of the labyrinth, First Central offers Christian education classes and occasional workshops. For further information, or if you would like to bring a group to walk the labyrinth, please contact the church office at 345-1533. Other labyrinth resources include Veriditas or The Labyrinth society.