

- Do all labyrinths have the same shape?

There are three basic designs being used--the seven, eleven, and twelve circuit - the seven circuit is the most common design found today. In each the labyrinth pathway meanders in such a way that the walker can never be quite sure how near to the end point they really are. The eleven-circuit labyrinth, is symbolic of Christ's cross with its four quadrants. Grace is symbolized by the never-ending path to the centre and back, allowing the pilgrim to walk the path at his own pace, stop for prayer and meditation as needed. In the Chartres style labyrinth, one meanders through each of the four quadrants several times before reaching the goal.

- Does a prayer walk have to be deliberately Christ-centered?

What do you think? How does God speak to you? Is it always through intentional Christian disciplines or can he touch your life in everyday walking and working? How do you expect to meet Christ?

Spiritual disciplines are meant to draw us into the presence of Christ. The ancient practices of the Christian church are not harsh duties to be performed with unquestioning rigour. Instead, they provide a means by which an intensely spiritual though distracted culture can find the source of that spirituality. In his book, *Contemplative Youth Ministry*, Mark Yaconelli says, "The contemplative tradition of the Christian faith comes to us as a precious gift in an age when no one has time to sit still. It comes as a medicine to a church culture obsessed with trends, efficiency, techniques, and bullet-point results." Jesus called His disciple to times of personal retreat. What would happen if we truly heard this call and practised His presence in the midst of our busy



This 2010 Advent prayer walk took the form of a grass labyrinth mown by a teenage boy guided by my spray painted template

For further study and practice:

There is geographical information about Christian and other labyrinths on the LabyrinthsNZ website <http://www.labyrinthsnz.com/#/map/4560043510>

Visit the Koru Labyrinth at OASIS RETREAT AND STUDY CENTRE

206 Albany Heights Road, Albany, North Shore (09) 415 9686

There is a prayer labyrinth at the back of **Eden Community Church**, 72 - 74 View Road, Mt Eden. Ph: (09) 630 3423

A **Chartres style Labyrinth** is located at Twyford on the outskirts of Hastings. Access by arrangement. Phone Alison Kerr (06) 879 6160. **St Luke's in the City** (Christchurch) also have a Labyrinth prayer walk—see www.stlukesinthecity.org.nz

You can even make a virtual labyrinth walk online:

<http://www.rejesus.co.uk/site/module/labyrinth/>

Some Christian bookstores also sell small circular labyrinths that fit in your palm; you use a stylus to move slowly through it.

Vivian Coleman

GODSHAPEDLIFE DISCIPLESHIP and MINISTRY COACH

godshapedlife

Spiritual Practices

Practice Seven



"He guides me in paths of righteousness for his name's sake." Psalm 23: 3

"Practice" means the repeated performance of a task or action regularly over time. A spiritual practice is exactly what the word suggests, a way to be deliberate about matters of the soul. While most of us think of prayer as a spiritual practice, not all of us have had the opportunity to practise prayer by deliberately; walking a labyrinth.

When this paper was originally published there was a mown grass labyrinth available behind our local church for people to walk after church or over the next couple of weeks for the Advent Season. A photo of that is included as well as some from the labyrinth mown annually at a local college.

"A godshaped life is a flourishing tree" Prov 11: 28

Vivian Coleman

www.godshapedlife.com

Prayer Labyrinth

“What joy for those whose strength comes from the LORD, who have set their minds on a pilgrimage.” Psalm 84: 5

“Blessed are they who keep his statutes and seek him with all their heart. They do nothing wrong; they walk in his ways.” Psalm 119: 2–3

Pilgrimages to holy sites have been part of the Christian tradition for millennia. Some disciples of Jesus have visited the Holy Land, and Orthodox and Catholic believers still make pilgrimages to places like Lourdes and Fatima. When an actual pilgrimage is not affordable or accessible, the discipline of pilgrimage can be honoured through the symbolic prayer walk of the labyrinth.

Labyrinth prayer is a contemplative spiritual discipline. It involves prayerfully walking a marked path based on the ancient practice of pilgrimage. On a pilgrimage, a pilgrim intentionally leaves their ordinary world, journeying away from the distractions and busyness of life. The goal of the pilgrimage is a place where Christ's presence is experienced afresh. The pilgrim then returns home to live more deliberately and obediently as a disciple.

“A spiritual discipline sets us free to pray, or to say it better, allows the Spirit of God to pray in us.” **Henri Nouwen**

Labyrinths became popular around the twelfth century as a substitute for making a pilgrimage to a holy site. Labyrinths are not mazes, nor are they something magical. Walking the labyrinth is not a new-fangled technique to jump-start your spiritual life. It is a slow quiet meditative practice that expresses and fulfils the desire to make a journey into heart of God. The floor of Chartres Cathedral has a labyrinth that has been used by pilgrims for centuries.

The labyrinth is a metaphor for life. The Christian life is often described as a journey or adventure (such as Pilgrim's Progress). We progress down the path that is laid out by God, coming to turns and switch-backs that are often unexpected. The twists and turns take us in many directions but still we progress on the journey. The path continues to lead us to the centre and to God's purpose for us. The labyrinth, then, replicates our spiritual journey.

The physical and mental action of walking the labyrinth engages the left brain (logical, sequential) which frees the right brain (spiritual, creative, intuitive) to engage in prayer and meditation. This is why the labyrinth is called an active prayer.

Many of these observations come from a useful article by Robert Ferre to be found at <http://www.labyrinth-enterprises.com/12reasons.html>

Walking the labyrinth is time out from our daily schedule. We aren't checking items off a list of things to do, or planning the menu for dinner. Walking in a labyrinth is a gift to ourselves. During the walk, we can relax our mind but we still must remain alert, to follow the path. This state of relaxed alertness is the ideal form of meditation. With our sense of awareness, we are open to any messages or inspiration or creativity that may come to us. In one instance, a labyrinth walker received a clear urge to call her sister, from whom she had been estranged for more than ten years. That evening, when she made the call, her sister replied, "Just today I was thinking that we should resolve our differences. I'm so glad to hear from you."

When listening, we can learn. We can discover. While talking or demanding or lecturing or analyzing, we close ourselves off. Within listening there is an element of surrender that takes us out of time and space. Some call it Holy Listening.

Got Questions?

- What is the difference between a maze and a labyrinth?

The terms 'maze' and 'labyrinth' are often used interchangeably but modern scholars use a stricter definition. Put simply, a maze is a puzzle or game with many paths, where choices have to be made, with some junctions leading to dead ends. They may be constructed from hedges or other materials that obstruct the view of the central goal. A labyrinth however has only a single path to the centre. Its through-route to the centre and back is unambiguous and not designed to be difficult to navigate. The pattern is marked on the ground, the whole of the pathway can be easily seen throughout the walk, and you can't get lost in it.



- Aren't labyrinths a dangerous New Age practice?

Some believers do associate them with New Age mystical practices or even occultism. And it is true that outside of the Christian tradition are other labyrinth traditions, one of which utilizes dowsing or divining. Rather than dowsing for water, one dowses for the dimensions of the labyrinth that are seen to generate power. The Christian tradition, on the other hand, sees the power coming not from the labyrinth, but from the act of prayer-walking. Thus, it is we who energize the labyrinth, not the other way around. It is the physical nature of our involvement, using our whole bodies and our senses, which is most important.



Practical Pointers

There is no right or wrong way to walk the labyrinth. However, the following suggestions may help exploration this unique spiritual practice:

- Begin by taking a few slow, deep breaths to relax your body and empty the mind of clutter, except for a simple meditative word such as “love,” “peace” or “Christ.”
- Walk at a comfortable pace and as the Spirit leads. You may want to pause along the path or at each turn and repeat your prayer or word.
- Don’t try to look ahead or focus on the centre of the labyrinth while walking. Live in the moment and focus on the path just in front of your feet.
- Use the prayer guides on the ground or create your own spiritual experience.
- Some may like to listen to quiet music (without lyrics or recognisable tunes) as you walk.
- If you meet another soul along the walk, let them pass.
- When you get to the centre, pause to meditate or pray and listen to God.
- When you are ready, follow the path out of the centre and back through the labyrinth.
- When you exit the labyrinth, you may want to pause and thank God for guidance. You also may want to sit on a bench and reflect on the experience.

Just as no two days on our spiritual journey are alike, no two walks through the labyrinth are the same. For that reason, don’t try to over-analyze or evaluate your experience. Instead, be grateful for quiet time spent in prayer with the Lord.

One of the most noticeable effects of walking the labyrinth is stress reduction. We can see the difference in our physical bodies. Stress kills, and the reduction of stress heals. The same is true with life balance. Our priorities get far out of kilter sometimes. When that happens, we experience dis-ease. The labyrinth can bring us back to a state of equilibrium. It can contribute to bodily healing and well-being. Being physical, the labyrinth is anchored in time and space, just as we are.

One of the most common observations during the sharing time after a labyrinth walk is the realization that we are all on the same path, even if it looks like people are all going in many different directions. The people in the paths adjacent to the walker may be walking in the opposite direction. Even on a given path, some people are going in while others are coming out. Yet everyone is pursuing the same journey. Even then, there's room within unity for a considerable amount of diversity.

The Labyrinth is an Ancient Practice.

The idea of labyrinth goes back 5,000 years or more. We first hear of it in Greek mythology, where an elaborate structure was constructed for King Minos of Crete to hold the minotaur, a man/bull creature that was eventually slain. The hero Theseus killed the minotaur and then was able to find his way back by following a thread— revealing that the labyrinth was not a maze but a single path. Labyrinths were also used as spiritual aids in ancient Egypt, Peru, and India.

Beginning in the Middle Ages, Christianity adopted the labyrinth as a symbol, changing the design to imbue it with specifically Christian meaning. Medieval Christians used labyrinths as a means to meditate, pray and connect with God. Prayer labyrinths were often viewed as a spiritual pilgrimage for those who could not afford to travel to Jerusalem, the spiritual centre of Christian pilgrims.



Numerous cathedrals in Europe have prayer labyrinths embedded into their floors. The Christian labyrinth tradition reached its peak at Notre-Dame de Chartres Cathedral, in France, with the installation of an elegant purpose-built labyrinth in the nave floor when the church was constructed in 1201. This labyrinth about 80 km from Paris is extremely well-known and visited by thousands every year.

Little detail is known of how these labyrinths were used, other than for rituals during Easter; they may in fact have been reserved for the clergy. Three steps that were described in the early Middle Ages are:

1. Purgation: Releasing and shedding as we walk towards the centre
2. Illumination: Resting in the centre to receive inspiration
3. Union: Returning to our lives with a new awareness.

In Chartres Cathedral, one of the greatest of all Gothic cathedrals, the spiritual journey is symbolized everywhere – in the geometry, the art, the architecture, and the labyrinth. The church is seen as the gateway, the connection between heaven and earth. In the same way, the labyrinth is the threshold between the physical world and the metaphysical, between the outer and the inner life. By the 17th and 18th centuries however, prayer labyrinths had lost much of their spiritual meaning.

The Labyrinth is a Contemporary Practice

The practice of walking the prayer labyrinth is becoming popular again, particularly in the ecumenical, postdenominational environment of the Emerging Church movement. Christian denominations from across the theological spectrum are again adopting the practice. The prayer labyrinth is not a *maze* in the popular sense, and rather has one path on which one cannot get lost, serving a powerful symbol of individual life journeys and pilgrimage in faith.

Thus we are enjoying a period of historic labyrinth revival. Christians all over the world are installing labyrinths in their yards and gardens; a conservative estimate says there are over 5,000 labyrinths in the United States today. Churches, retreat centres and Christian camps are placing these prayer tools inside and outside. Many are using the labyrinths as a ministry tool, bringing portable versions to prisons, national denominational conferences and church

group meetings. This ancient practice can touch people very deeply, often in a way they can't verbalize. God is blessing the use of the labyrinth; people are being drawn closer to Jesus, experiencing healing and gaining spiritual clarity as they pray on its path. People walking labyrinths today are also linking with the communion of saints of other eras and can sense the simultaneity of past and present in God's love.



As in ancient times, labyrinth prayer is based on the metaphor of pilgrimage, an outer journey with an inner purpose. It takes us away from the routine of daily life to sacred places where the veil seems thinner and spirituality more approachable. The labyrinth does this. It organizes our experience and engages us in spiritual travel. Some call it a quest. In the labyrinth we walk in a way we don't walk elsewhere, which leads to a new kind of experience. The world has endless choices and paths, most of which lead nowhere. The labyrinth path is sure, certain, dependable. It is an appropriate and accessible place to go on pilgrimage. In a maze, one loses oneself, whereas in a labyrinth, one finds oneself. Walking the labyrinth brings order to chaos.

That doesn't mean, however, that it is easy. In a labyrinth there are no short cuts. We must walk the entire length of the path. Our goal is not a labyrinth experience, but a spiritual experience. The labyrinth has shown itself to be a very efficient spiritual aid. Ultimately, of course, the result depends on the user and not the tool.

Walking the labyrinth is a non-verbal experience. It helps to cultivate our inner life. Walking the labyrinth outdoors, one experiences a range of circumstances and weather, from hot to cold, dry or rainy, day or night. It has great variety, just like life. In our modern society we have lost contact with creation, the changing of the seasons, the constellations, the freshness of the air. Walking an outdoor labyrinth incorporates these aspects to enhance our experience.

When walking the labyrinth with others, a joining takes place. Community is formed. People may say they prefer to walk the labyrinth alone, and not be distracted by others. But when they have walked as part of a group, they express surprise at how poignant their experience was. The group energy helped to create a space which enhanced each individual experience.

Recent adaptations of the original labyrinth make use of technology, imagery and prayer stations. Prayer stations help participants relinquish distractions, confess their failures and admit their brokenness before God. At the centre travellers may rest on pillows, light candles or celebrate communion. As they move outward, participants may pray for those who are far from God, remember the global community of faith and think about the witness they are leaving for others. They may journal about their time on the labyrinth. Many describe the experience of prayer and meditation as life-changing. Labyrinth walking has been called the laying on of feet.

“The labyrinth is truly a tool for our times.... an evocative experience. The labyrinth provides the sacred space where the inner and outer worlds can commune, where the thinking mind and imaginative heart can flow together. It provides a space to listen.

(Lauren Artress in *Walking a Sacred Path*:

Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool, Riverhead Books, New York, 1995).



For many years the graduating students at St Kentigern College in Auckland have been invited by the chaplaincy team to walk a labyrinth in the school grounds, as a path to Biblical reflection on the past and their future. Marker stones and a guidesheet enhance their contemplation.