

SPIRITUAL SEEKERS REVIVE ANCIENT LABYRINTH AS TOOL FOR MEDITATION

RALEIGH, N.C. - In ancient times, Christians re-enacted Jesus' torturous journey to the cross by traveling to the holy city of Jerusalem. Today, some churchgoers celebrate the completion of a similar, spiritual journey.

These modern-day Christians travel across a serpentine scheme they say is as sacred as the route traversed by their ancestors. They walk the labyrinth. In churches across America, Christians have seized on an age-old pattern as a way to awaken their spirits and open their souls to God.

Reprints of ancient labyrinths have multiplied like the biblical loaves and fishes in many Christian churches hungry for new rituals and sacred history. With candles burning and soft music playing, churchgoers take off their shoes and step into the canvas labyrinth in search of an inner revelation.

"I started walking the labyrinth hoping there would be a healing of sorts for my son," said Helen Hinerman, 73, of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Greensboro, N.C. Her son Joseph died two years ago. "As I walked weekly, it became easier for me to accept the fact that he would not live. Life goes into death, but you have to go on. The labyrinth was my great meditational support."

The appeal of the labyrinth lies in its simplicity. There is no script to tell a person how to interpret the experience; this is a solitary walk between the individual and God. As they traverse the labyrinth, many church members say, their hearts open up and buried thoughts rise to the surface.

One woman learned to deal with her impending divorce. Another, with her children leaving home. For others, a labyrinth walk during Lent was an opportunity to think about Jesus' death and the role that death plays in their lives.

"I often experience it as walking into the center of myself," said the Rev. Jeanette Stokes, director of the Resource Center for Women in Ministry in the South, and a labyrinth guide. "It's a way of being open to the truths in our lives."

Fascination with the labyrinth has grown steadily since Grace Cathedral in San Francisco laid a labyrinth on the floor of its sanctuary in 1991 and invited the community to walk it. When its pastor, Lauren Artress, wrote a book, "Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool," other Episcopal churches jumped on the practice. Since then, daylong labyrinth workshops have been held in most mainstream denominations. Although few churches actually buy the labyrinths - which can cost \$1,500 to \$3,500 - about a dozen nonprofit groups and businesses have formed to guide churches in how to use it and to lend them the pattern. One St. Louis man makes a living constructing 36-foot canvas labyrinths, which he produces at a rate of 100 a year.

"Our ultimate goal is to get labyrinths into the world," said Robert Ferre, the director of the St. Louis Labyrinth Project. "Hospitals ought to have labyrinths. Churches ought to have labyrinths. I don't see why airports, schools and parks can't have labyrinths."

The benefits of the labyrinth transcend religious experience - often they are used as a walking meditation or as a psychological tool for healing. But churches have picked up this new form with particular zeal.

"People are seeking out tools that will help them more fully experience God in their daily lives," said Gretchen Jordan, director of Christian Education at Olin Binkley Memorial Baptist Church in Chapel Hill, N.C., which was host of a labyrinth workshop in February. "The labyrinth because of its connection through the centuries gives us an opportunity to enhance our relationship with God and connect with people of faith through the ages."

Although they have been unearthed in ancient Egyptian and Hopi Indian cultures, among others, labyrinths have had an especially strong place in Christianity.

In Europe, during the Middle Ages, people began to regard as a divine imprint a particular pattern some have likened to a cross-section of the brain. In 1220, this classic, 11-circuit labyrinth was laid in stone on the floor of the Chartres Cathedral in France, one of the most majestic in the world.

When political upheavals made travel to Jerusalem dangerous, the Roman Catholic Church created seven "pilgrimage" cathedrals, including Chartres, where people used the labyrinth to conduct spiritual instead of physical journeys. The pattern used at Chartres was particularly popular because it had no tricks or dead ends. A single path winds from the outside of the circle through twists and turns to its center, shaped like a flower.

During the Enlightenment, the labyrinth fell by the wayside as literacy increased and people turned to books as a way to know God. In Chartres, the labyrinth was covered with movable chairs. Today, there's a harking back to an older wisdom.

"Theology has become so intellectualized," said Sharyn Warren, a clinical social worker who bought a labyrinth for her practice and makes it available at her church, Covenant Christian Church in Cary, N.C., "Worship has been prescribed for us. There's a constraint there. Walking the labyrinth is a direct connection. No one is telling us the form it has to take. It emerges from within in ways that surprise the walker."

Labyrinths are used year-round but have a special resonance during Lent, when Christians are called to reflect on their relationship with God.

During a typical workshop, walkers are asked to jot down thoughts before they enter the labyrinth and to return to their notes afterward. It is a quiet and solitary walk. People often clutch tissues to dab their eyes and nose.

The journey has three parts: walking into the center, resting in the heart of the labyrinth, and walking out.

"It involves a journey inward toward God who dwells in the center of our being and a journey outward toward integration and a creative expression of our gifts to the world," said the Rev. Tim Patterson of Holy Trinity Episcopal Church in Greensboro, N.C..

For many churchgoers who have a hard time sitting still, a labyrinth is the perfect meditation method because it keeps the body active. But because it's impossible to anticipate how the path will twist and turn, the mind of the walker is set free.

"It keeps reminding me I have to follow where I'm led," said Libby Heermans, a member of Holy Trinity. "I can't be in control of everything. I try to give up control and concentrate on my sense of trust."

But most of all, the labyrinth is a tool to help people access a deeper part of themselves. At a time when many congregations are seeking new ways of drawing in people, the labyrinth offers a fresh alternative.

"We don't give people the time and the opportunity to be quiet and spend time with God," said Nancy Noel, a member of First Baptist Church in Henderson, N.C. "That's important for a church to do. If you don't pay attention to your relationship with God and nourish it at some point, you'll feel shallow."

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