

12 REASONS TO HAVE A CHURCH LABYRINTH

These comments were written for a presentation to a labyrinth committee in Bloomington, Indiana, which requested that I give them sufficient material to convince their church to get a labyrinth. If you would like to present this article to your church, [click here for pdf format](#).

1. Updating Spirituality with the Labyrinth

Churches are constantly in a state of transition as they attempt to remain relevant to society. The Reverend Dr. Lauren Artress has stated, "The movement in the church to reclaim its lost spiritual tradition is enormously significant."

The labyrinth is an ideal spiritual tool which can be used to reach people who don't relate to the church as an institution. The labyrinth is personal, generic, and meaningful. It also helps to build community. While providing labyrinths is a wonderful public service to the community, we know of many instances in which people became involved in churches as members and participants after first coming to walk the labyrinth.

The labyrinth, then, can be used to draw new people to a church. Whether they like what they find, and whether they decide to become involved in the church, is beyond the capability of the labyrinth. That depends on the church and what it has to offer. The labyrinth enhances the image of being progressive, of incorporating new elements.

One of the ways this has been done in many places is to combine labyrinth walking with music from Taize. Taize is an ecumenical community in France which desires to unify the divisions and differences that separate the Christian family. As a result, they have no dogma to teach, since dogma divides rather than unifies. Their services are comprised almost entirely of repetitively singing beautiful chants, in Latin or a variety of languages. Labyrinths also have no dogma, "speak" many languages, and unify. Combining Taize chanting and labyrinth walking creates a meaningful experience.

Updating spirituality means creating new forms, new formats, new rituals. Because the labyrinth is generic by nature, it can easily be adapted to uses such as meditation, weddings, memorial services, use by women's groups, AIDS and 12-step support groups, troubled teenagers, abuse victims, cancer patients, and in many other ways for which spiritual input is beneficial.

2. The Labyrinth Is Traditional

The labyrinth goes back 5,000 years or more. Beginning in the Middle Ages, Christianity adopted the labyrinth as a symbol, changing the design to imbue it with specifically Christian meaning. For almost a thousand years there has been an identifiable Christian labyrinth tradition. (For more on this subject, see *Church Labyrinths*, a book by Robert Ferre available at www.labyrinth-entrprises.com.) This movement reached its peak at Chartres Cathedral, in France, with the installation of an elegant labyrinth into the nave floor in 1201 during the construction of the magnificent new Gothic structure.

The labyrinth incorporates many levels of symbolism within its sacred geometry. Its circularity and concentric circles reflect the cosmos, atoms, and DNA. The geometry comprises the very principles of manifestation utilized by the Divine Hand in its creation of the physical universe. (For more on sacred geometry, see the audio tape on sacred geometry by Robert Ferre, available from www.labyrinth-enterprises.com/products.html.)

In our modern world we have lost touch with our origins, our roots, even our true identity. The labyrinth is the bridge that connects us to these things, to a long-forgotten part of ourselves. That's why it touches people very deeply, often in a way they can't verbalize, as the context itself is ancient.

3. The Labyrinth Is Contemporary

There is scant record of how the labyrinth was originally used, other than for rituals during Easter. Therefore, a new format has been adopted, to serve our modern needs. Whereas today the labyrinth is democratic, and available to anyone who would walk it, in the past it may have been reserved for ritual use by the clergy.

Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool, by Lauren Artress, has been helpful in suggesting ways to make the labyrinth relevant. Borrowing three steps described in the early Middle Ages, she applies them to the stages of walking the labyrinth. They are:

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

Lauren Artress writes, "The labyrinth is truly a tool for our times. It can help us find our way through the bewildering multiplicity, to the unity of source. The labyrinth is 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 can provide a space to listen to our inner voice of wisdom and come to grips with our role in humankind's next evolutionary step."

Carole Ann Camp, co-author of *Labyrinths From the Outside In: Walking to Spiritual Insight, A Beginner's Guide*, expands the process to seven steps:

1. Preparation
2. Invocation
3. Going in
4. Staying in the center
5. Returning to the world
6. Thanksgiving
7. Reflection

Camp's co-author, Donna Schaper, writes, "One of the key reasons people walk labyrinths today is to have the experience of the simultaneity of past and present. In walking the labyrinth we link with other cultures and eras. We also link body and soul; we simultaneously have a physical and spiritual experience. We make metaphors work for us. The journey is one foot after another, and it is a path to the holy place inside us."

Schaper discusses the ecumenical, postdenominational environment of churches today. The labyrinth fits right into that picture, being generic and non-dogmatic. Camp asked her daughter the difference between religion and spirituality. The teenager replied, "In religion, you have to just sit there. But in spirituality, you can move around" (presumably on labyrinths).

4. Labyrinth Walking Is a Spiritual Practice

Spirituality requires attention, hence, a category of activities known as spiritual practices. Walking a labyrinth is such a practice. In this way, the labyrinth makes spirituality accessible to everyone. It is a form of personal meditation and devotion, not a piety of obedience.

The labyrinth takes us beyond our limited, conditioned personality and learning to a deeper place of awareness and revelation. In that state, we can practice being in the presence of God. We can sing, pray, or dance. While walking the labyrinth we can repeat a phrase as our mantra, such as "Lead me," or "Be still and know I am God." In the Old Testament, David advised Solomon to "Walk in the ways of God." What we learn in the labyrinth we then take back into our lives.

Lauren Artress was worried when she first began using labyrinths. It was clear that they were powerful, but to what end? Could labyrinths be too much? Could they overwhelm? Could they injure people? She reports, "After months of walking the labyrinth and listening to the experiences of others, I began to trust the labyrinth." She goes on to describe her discovery as having faith in the process, which I take to be the same as trusting the spiritual practice.

When teaching people how to walk the labyrinth, I try not to create unreasonable expectations of what will happen. I believe that the labyrinth meets each person where they are and helps them to take the next step on their spiritual path. Because it is so personal, it is a spiritual practice that can be enjoyed by everyone.

The labyrinth is a spiritual tool. We learn how to use tools expertly through practice. They become extensions of our own abilities, allowing us to be stronger or faster. In the case of the labyrinth, it helps us to meditate more profoundly, and to go deeper within. With practice comes improvement. Therefore, walking a labyrinth is best done on a consistent basis to obtain the maximum results. It is, indeed, a spiritual practice.

5. The Labyrinth Is Physical

As a form of body prayer, the labyrinth embodies our experience, keeping it from being just theoretical or mental. Someone said that bodies can synthesize what the head can only distinguish. Saint Augustine is often quoted as having said, "It is solved by walking." Labyrinth walking has been called the laying on of feet.

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 balance. Our priorities get far out of kilter sometimes. When that happens, we experience dis-ease. The labyrinth brings 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.

Any labyrinth maker can describe how important are the physical traits of the labyrinth, namely its size, location, and orientation. Outside of the Christian tradition are other labyrinth traditions, one of which utilizes dowsing. Rather than dowsing for water, one dowses for the dimensions of the labyrinth. This approach is generally based on the concept that the physical properties of the labyrinth generate power. Thus, the mechanical details are important. The Christian tradition, on the other hand, sees the power coming not from the labyrinth, but from the act of walking. Thus, it is we who energize the labyrinth, not the other way around. Both of these traditions are credible. In Christian labyrinths, however, more importance is usually given to the symbolism than the physical properties. It is the physical nature of our involvement, using our whole bodies and our senses, which is most important.

6. The Labyrinth Is a Form of Pilgrimage

Pilgrimage is 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.

Pilgrimage is a tradition in most religions, from sitting in front of the grotto in Lourdes to circling the Kaaba in Mecca. Taking time out to honor one's relation to God is important and essential. Even today, thousands walk to Santiago de Compostella. Being on a spiritual journey is the perfect metaphor and image for both life and the labyrinth.

In Chartres Cathedral, one of the greatest of all Gothic cathedrals, our spiritual journey is symbolized everywhere – in the sacred geometry, the art, the architecture, and the labyrinth. The church is 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.

While the labyrinth symbolizes the route, no one can take it for someone else. We must each find our own way. I particularly like the approach of the Taize Community, which works with thousands of young people. The Taize brothers tell them, "We don't have any answers to give you, but we will be with you and assist you to find your own answers." The labyrinth is the same, in that it imposes nothing, but allows each person to find that which is meaningful to them.

Life can be many kinds of journeys. 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.

7. The Labyrinth Is a Spiritual Aid

Each of us may have to pursue his or her own individual spiritual quest, but that doesn't mean we don't need some help. Our success rate is vastly increased by the utilization of spiritual aids. In some instances, people engage a spiritual director or counselor to advise them. Likewise, the labyrinth can

be a spiritual aid. According to Lauren Artress, "The labyrinth can play a significant role in the field of spiritual direction."

It's ironic, of course, that we actually find our way in the labyrinth, when it is commonly used as a literary metaphor for a place in which we get lost, amidst confusion and complexity. Such literary devices are really referring to mazes, which have many paths and dead ends. In a maze, one loses oneself, whereas in a labyrinth, one finds oneself. Walking the labyrinth brings order to chaos.

It is much easier to drink water out of a container, such as a glass. The glass is only the aid, not the water, but it makes the water readily available. As with a glass, the labyrinth is a container. It is a road map, a menu. Drinking the water, taking the journey, or eating the meal is up to us. The labyrinth makes our spiritual quest possible through organizing us. Through its format and guidance, the labyrinth acts like a spiritual homing device, a compass and a gyroscope, all in one.

It is common for us to criticize and find fault with our spiritual efforts. We see ourselves as falling short of the mark. The labyrinth, with its single path, offers a way that is certain. 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. If we persevere, the outcome is assured.

The labyrinth is a source of spiritual self-esteem, a positive feedback loop. We go to the center of the labyrinth. In all books of symbolism the center stands for God, creation, truth, wholeness, healing. That is where the labyrinth leads us, and with those gifts, we return back to our lives.

With a hammer, we can build a house. The hammer is important and extremely helpful, but the objective is the house. The same is true with the labyrinth. We should not confuse the tool with the purpose. 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.

8. Going Beyond the Mind

Every religious tradition has some ritual or technique to take us past our thinking mind. It is as if we have a crust on the outside, made of our personality, our learning and conditioning, cultural socialization, and intellectual activity. But there is much more to us, within. The labyrinth leads us deep within, to our center, where we encounter our authentic selves, far beyond the limits of the shallow mind.

In a society filled with noise pollution, words and images flood us from TV, radio, and the Internet. It is overwhelming. Walking the labyrinth is a non-verbal experience. It helps to cultivate our inner life. Rumi, the Sufi poet, said that we should spend at least as much time in the invisible world as in the visible. In the same way, we can spend time in the non-rational, non-thinking, non-verbal world.

Pierre Teilhard de Chardin wrote that truth cannot be found in the world. We must find it by going within. Once we find it, we realize that the truth is universal. The point where that which is most

personal becomes All That Is, the universal, he called the Omega Point. Walking labyrinths, then, is not a selfish act, as the resulting truth will shine out into the world through our lives.

Lauren Artress writes, "To walk a sacred path is to discover our inner sacred space....Walking the labyrinth clears the mind and gives insight into the spiritual journey." We can't think our way. We must trust forces greater than ourselves. When we go to our center, it is really The Center, the same center in which we shall all meet as One. It is the Divine.

9. Outdoor Labyrinths Add Another Dimension

Labyrinths help us to think outside the box (sanctuary). In 1996, a group of pilgrims led by Lauren Artress and Robert Ferre walked labyrinths both in Chartres Cathedral and in a friend's garden. Some of the group found their experience on the garden labyrinth to be more powerful. One reason may well have been that the garden labyrinth was outdoors, on the ground, in a beautiful setting.

There is an attraction to outdoor activities, such as campfires and Easter sunrise services. 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.

There is a connection between nature and the labyrinth. In our modern society we have lost contact with the changing of the seasons, the constellations, the freshness of the air. Walking an outdoor labyrinth incorporates these aspects to enhance our experience.

Furthermore, outdoor labyrinths are usually available 24 hours a day, even when the church is locked. This is a significant benefit for the community.

10. Labyrinths Build Community

When walking the labyrinth with others, a joining takes place. Community is formed. On numerous occasions people have stated to me that they prefer to walk the labyrinth alone, and not be distracted by others. Later, after walking as part of a group, they expressed surprise at how poignant their experience was. The group energy helped to create a space which enhanced each individual experience.

The community built by the labyrinth extends beyond walking it together. The labyrinth committee, in overseeing and maintaining the labyrinth, works and trains together, introducing others to the labyrinth. Often the committee is involved in the planning, fundraising, and even construction of the labyrinth.

There is only one problem in the world, expressed in many variations: separation from God and each other. The only solution is to join together, to move from one to One. The labyrinth challenges the image of life being a lonely, hazardous journey through a maze. It is much more enjoyable and fruitful to pursue this journey with others rather than in isolation.

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.

Donna Schaper writes, "The labyrinth lets people walk together and separately without agreeing on anything. The very ancient nature of the labyrinth combined with the archetypal metaphor of its design draws us to absolutes that transcend any human constructs that have separated humanity into arbitrary religious categories for centuries. That is why labyrinths are so welcome today: they allow each of us to find our own center in our own way."

11. A Time to Listen

Some see prayer as asking and meditation as listening. Certainly one of the great lessons in life is to give up being in charge, to get out of our own way, and to turn things over to guidance from a higher source. Author Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion has written several poetic books about using labyrinths. She has found that the labyrinth has many gifts for us, but to receive them, we must be receptive. We must listen. How else can we know if our supplications have been heard?

Walking the labyrinth is time out from our daily schedule. We aren't checking items off our list of things to do, or planning the menu for dinner. Walking in a labyrinth is a gift we give 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.

Lauren Artress writes, "The labyrinth is a spiritual tool meant to awaken us to the deep rhythm that unities us to ourselves and to the light that calls from within."

12. The Labyrinth Answers Our Call for Help

One researcher believes that labyrinths have reappeared throughout history at times of spiritual crisis. One can certainly argue that our world, and our society, are out of control. Decisions for policies that affect the public are made with political or commercial objectives in mind that don't serve us, especially with regard to our spiritual needs. Response to our inner longing is not likely to be found in our secular institutions. That's not their mandate.

Meeting such needs is the appropriate mission of churches. Labyrinths can help. Labyrinths restore the balance and the inner awareness that the world lacks. Of course, we, too, are the world, so eventually, the world itself changes as a reflection of our personal change.

Everyone who has a labyrinth should keep a notebook into which people can record their response to walking the labyrinth. Many of the popular labyrinth books are filled with such quotations, which are very inspiring.

Donna Schaper writes, "Walking the labyrinth is not about escaping into the center and leaving the world, it is about experiencing Spirit in the center so that you can live in the world in a more blessed way."

The labyrinth has been shown to be very effective in addressing grief. The labyrinth is feminine, embracing, nurturing – qualities that are in great demand. People often respond to the labyrinth without actually knowing why. They simply like how they feel in its embrace. It gives people a chance to charge their batteries before going back into the fray.

Most of all, labyrinths have healing qualities on many levels, emotional, psychological, physical, spiritual. This comes at a time when we greatly need healing. Healing must be an inside job, which is exactly how labyrinths function. Labyrinths are undergoing a great revival, if for no other reason, because we need them.

Written as a public service by Robert Ferré

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Robert can be reached by email at: robert@labyrinth-enterprises.com