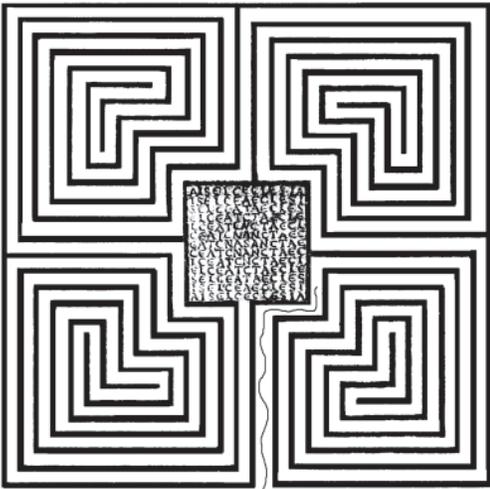

1,600 Years of Christian Labyrinths

in the indigenous African & Black-American Traditions



The earliest documented use of a labyrinth in a Christian context comes from northern Africa, in El-Asnam (in the area that is now Algeria). Constructed around 324 AD, this labyrinth was in use over 1,600 years ago, for Christian purposes of worship and devotion.

This labyrinth (*shown at left*) was found in the Basilica of St. Reparatus. It was a mosaic pavement tile that was approximately 2.5 meters wide that may have been used for visual prayerful contemplation and a corporate expression of faith. In the center of this labyrinth was a word arrangement that spelled out "SANCTA ECCLESIA" or "Holy Church," in all directions.

To the present day, labyrinths have been used in Christian communities, world-wide.

One of the world's most-contemporary labyrinths is the Reconciliation labyrinth (*shown at right*). Originally designed by a resident of post-Apartheid South-Africa in 2002, it has been actively used worldwide. This labyrinth is designed with two entrances, and one exit. Designed for those seeking reconciliation with each other, this labyrinth is intended for two such persons to each use a separate entrance, simultaneously, walking their own path. They eventually pass each other and cross over to walk the path of the other, then join together to continue the work of reconciliation in the labyrinth's center. Finally, they walk together out the one exit pathway. Throughout this contemporary labyrinth, however, there are intentional options given to the walkers to go only as far as they are able to go, but also to be ready to come back at a later time to continue their journey.



Labyrinths in the United States & Canada

Throughout the last couple of decades, churches across North America have made extensive use of labyrinths as a spiritual tool for Christian prayer, contemplation and worship. A recent survey discovered over 900 permanent labyrinths within churches in the United States, including over two dozen labyrinths in Christian Church (Disciples of Christ) congregations, alone.

While a basic pattern of use has developed in the American labyrinth movement, many churches are finding their own unique ways to incorporate this Christian spiritual practice into their community life. Liturgical dance, Lenten Journeys to the Cross, practices of discernment, prayer services, a tool for centering one's self in God's holy Spirit, celebration of Lord's Supper, baptismal preparation, and more are some of the ways labyrinths are being used. How might you and your church use a labyrinth to empower personal and community Christian life to a deeper level? While there are many labyrinth patterns being used by churches, two popular patterns are based on the over 800-year-old labyrinth found in the Chartres cathedral, and the over 4,000-year-old Classical labyrinth.



38-foot diameter temporary Chartres-style labyrinth made from masking tape at Southport Christian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana.

basic steps for using labyrinth as a prayer tool

remembering- You are invited to gather your thoughts at the entrance to the labyrinth, before you begin your walk; remember you are blessed. All that you have, all that you are is a blessing from God.

releasing- begins when you enter the labyrinth, continues as you follow the single twisting path, and ends upon arriving at the labyrinth's center. This is an opportunity for "letting-go" of whatever distracts you from being mindful of God's presence, here and now, and what God might have to offer you. This is a time for quieting, opening, emptying, and shedding. For some, this happens through a deepening of their breathing, or silent repetition of a simple prayer, or scriptural phrase.

receiving- is a gift at the center of the labyrinth. Having let go of distraction, there is now room in your soul to receive God's Spirit. Receiving guidance, new insight, deeper wisdom, a sense of peace are only a few experiences that can occur on a labyrinth walk. It is different for everyone. You may sit or stand in the center as long as you like. Receive what is there for you to receive, accepting such as a divine gift.

resolve- begins when you leave the center and return on the same singular winding pathway back out of the labyrinth toward the entrance. There are many aspects of this step: you can resolve to take a next step in your life, or come to a resolution about a concern or question. Rejuvenation often occurs, or a feeling of rebirth begins. Or, on your way out, you reclaim those responsibilities you set down on the way in, but for which you have a new strength to carry them. Often, feelings of strengthening and integration occur. Symbolically, you take back out into the world what you've received from God.



40-foot diameter Classical style labyrinth mowed in lawn at Allisonville Christian Church in Indianapolis, Indiana



18-foot diameter labyrinth being dedicated for use by African-American clergy, teachers and students at Southern University of New Orleans (SUNO).