



GREAT ENDEAVORS MINED & SHARED

from an International Adult Faith Formation Best Practices Study

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A Best Practice: Praying with the Labyrinth

As we walk with people today in the journey of faith, it is palpably evident that Christians – of all ages and walks of life – desire to pray, are looking for ways and times of prayer that touch their hearts and deepen their connection with God and one another.

As we near the celebration of World Labyrinth Day (the first Saturday of May), this year May 2, as well as the 5th anniversary of the dedication of the labyrinth featured here (also May 2nd), this newsletter explores this significant help for prayer for many people today: the labyrinth – and how it was constructed/used at the Mission of the Atonement in Beaverton, Oregon.

First, let's look at some background:

- What is the Mission of the Atonement?
- What is a labyrinth?
- What is the history of the labyrinth?
- Are there different types of labyrinths?

What is the Mission of the Atonement?

Located in Beaverton, Oregon, ten miles from downtown Portland, the Mission of the Atonement (MoTA) is an interfaith and inclusive spiritual community of both Lutherans and Catholics, sanctioned by

- the Catholic Archdiocese of Portland and
- the Oregon Synod of the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA)

MoTA has existed as a two-tradition Christian community for over 25 years. As an intentional community of two Christian traditions, they believe that everyone, the people of God, are the Church, as taught by the documents of Vatican Council II. They also believe, challenged by Scripture and our tradition, that all are compelled to go out to love and serve our neighbor.

A small but vibrant community, the congregation numbers around one hundred families. They strive for unity in diversity and are constantly searching for ways to reach out to the broader community surrounding them while growing in their own faith. It is this desire to both serve the broader

community and foster their Christian growth that brought them to the decision to build a parish labyrinth. (For more information about MoTA: www.motaspirit.org.)

What is a Labyrinth?

Labyrinths are designs found in cultures around the world. The labyrinth's



path may appear to be a maze, but it is actually a meditative walking path. A maze requires the walker to choose among various twists and turns along its path. All that can be seen is the immediate surroundings; the rest of a maze is obscured by high walls, bushes or the like. Success is marked by eventually finding the exit. Close attention to detail, employing deductive reasoning, and patience are the keys to successfully making your way through a maze.

In contrast, a labyrinth design has a set path; simply follow the path and we will reach the center. There are no walls that limit the view. Then from the center we return along the path and we will find the exit. While walking the labyrinth we can turn our attention inward. Simply follow the marked path. There are no decisions to make along the way. There are no blind alleys.

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When we walk a labyrinth our thoughts or prayers guide us where they may!

We are all on the path of life and at any given time we are on a specific point along that path. The labyrinth is a model of that path. The labyrinth is also a symbol that relates to wholeness. It combines the imagery of the circle and the spiral into a meandering but purposeful path. The labyrinth represents a journey to our own center and back again out into the world.

At its most basic level the labyrinth is a metaphor for **the journey to the center of our deepest selves and back out into the world** with a broadened understanding of who we are.

What is the History of the Labyrinth?

The labyrinth is an ancient pattern found in many cultures around the world. Labyrinth designs have been found on pottery, tablets and tiles dating as far back as 4000 years. Native American, Celtic, Greek and other cultures have all used various labyrinth designs as part of their spiritual practices.

[Pliny's Natural History](#) mentions four ancient labyrinths: the Cretan labyrinth, an Egyptian labyrinth, a labyrinth on Lemnos (a Greek island), and an Italian labyrinth.

Labyrinths have been used in the Christian tradition from at least the 4th century. A labyrinth design was found in the pavement ruins of the Basilica of Reparatus, in present day Algeria. Labyrinths began to appear in greater numbers on church walls and floors around the start of the second Christian millennium. The most famous medieval labyrinth, with great influence on later practice, was created in Chartres Cathedral, most likely dating from the 12th century. Some historians speculate that mazes on cathedral floors originated in the medieval period as alternatives to pilgrimages to the Holy Land.

The use of labyrinths has recently been revived in some contexts of Christian worship. For example, a labyrinth was set up on the floor of St Paul's Cathedral in London for a week in March 2000. At the annual Los Angeles Religious Education Congress in Anaheim, California, for at least the last ten years, an indoor labyrinth path has been included in a “quiet” area nearby the Blessed Sacrament chapel. This has introduced the labyrinth to thousands of religious educators from around the United States and Canada.

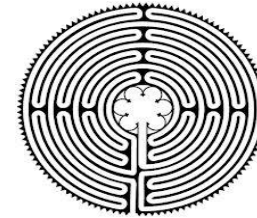
Are There Different Types of Labyrinths?

Today we find outdoor labyrinth designs done in brick and stones or planted with short bushes and grass. Indoor we will find painted applications on wood or stone and even “portable” labyrinths painted on plastic or heavy duty cloth that can be rolled up and moved from area to area.

The earliest style, now generally called the “**Classical**” style, dates around the year 1200 BC. Variations of this style have been used over the centuries; many new labyrinths constructed today follow one of the Classical models.



Jumping ahead to the second Christian millennium there is the “**Medieval Group**” of labyrinth designs most of which were patterned along the line of the Chartres Cathedral labyrinth.



There are now a whole host of **Contemporary** and **Miscellaneous** designs, including hand-held labyrinths that we “walk” with our fingers and even computer models where the mouse does the walking.



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The Labyrinth at Mission of the Atonement

After a three-year deliberation and planning process, the Mission of the Atonement (MoTA) broke ground in the fall of 2009 for their own Chartres-style Labyrinth. The community is blessed with members who have a wide variety of skills and talent and willing to give of their time and resources, sometimes literally moving mountains (or at least big piles of dirt).

The parish grounds were in need of help with overgrown and unkempt plants and the area where the labyrinth was to be located was neither flat nor level. Thus, the decision to create this sacred outdoor space would also contribute to making the entire parish grounds more attractive and welcoming.

The community opted to do a Chartres style labyrinth, one of the more difficult designs to plan and construct. The design is approximately 145 feet in circumference using both bricks and stone pavers, and is partially surrounded by a two-level stone seating area. All of the planning, land preparation, stone and brick cutting, cement pouring, and all details of the construction were done at no cost by parishioners and friends without outside professional help.



Many of the parishioners made specific contributions to buy all the building materials; further funding to cover the materials came from donations to insert memorial bricks into the actual labyrinth floor. Toward the end of the construction each member of the congregation, including those physically unable to help with the actual construction, was invited to place at least one

brick into the labyrinth floor. This was truly the work of the entire congregation.



There were, of course, some problems during the construction, including surprises dating back to the original buildings (more than 50 years old) that were found when the dirt was excavated and leveled. Other delays were due to the very wet Oregon climate, and all the other challenges that seem to happen when tackling a large construction project. What was hoped to be a two-month project dragged on for almost six-months.

Was it worth all the time, money and effort? Most parishioners would say that almost everyone in the community would give a resounding “Yes”!

The first major event was the dedication and blessing of the labyrinth on May 2, 2010, jointly celebrated by Lutheran Bishop Dave Brauer-Rieke and Auxiliary Catholic Bishop Kenneth D. Steiner (now retired).



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They blessed the labyrinth first with holy water and then together with everyone, especially the young children, blessed it again by blowing soap bubbles. The dedication concluded with live music and everyone was invited to dance on the labyrinth.



Another member often prays the rosary while walking the labyrinth, but most simply walk, seemingly without purpose, but quite possibly with something very special in mind.

The labyrinth has become a vital part of MoTa's welcome to strangers. Even those who have no idea what it is remark on the size and beauty of "the patio!" It has added to the community's prayer life and enhanced the beauty and utility of the grounds; it is one more thing that makes MoTA a unique community of prayer and service.



The Labyrinth in the Community of MoTA

Over the last five years the labyrinth has called people together, has been a gathering point for the community: community picnics, wedding anniversaries, adult and youth teaching experiences, special liturgical celebrations such as the Palm Sunday procession, and a host of other events.

But more important than these grand uses for the labyrinth is the opportunity for all the members, the nearby residents, people driving by and visitors who have come from near and far to visit, to walk and pray the labyrinth.

The labyrinth is open and available from dawn to dusk every day and almost every day, rain or shine, someone walks the labyrinth.

One member has begun the practice of spending her birthday each year as a day of silent retreat and reflection. She begins her birthday celebration early in the morning with a prayerful hour walk on the labyrinth.

Should Your Community Build a Labyrinth?

William Smith, a volunteer lay minister and educator at the Mission of the Atonement shares some thoughts and recommendations:

- Before trying to answer this question, find a nearby labyrinth; gather together a few of your friends and/or other parishioners and go for a walk. Consider going back a few times until you feel comfortable with it. Then and only then, can you begin to consider whether a labyrinth should be part of your community's future.

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Just below there are a number of resources that can help with this decision as well as a locator to find a labyrinth near where you live.

- If you do want to move to the next step, consider first creating an easy path marked by small stones laid on the surface of the ground. This takes little effort but can begin to give your parishioners an experience of a labyrinth.
- If you're leaning toward a permanent construction of a labyrinth, carefully weigh the skills and availability of your parishioners and/or the funds to hire a competent contractor. MoTA's membership includes a licensed contractor, more than one member with masonry experience, a talented designer and a few engineers. They all worked together, spending many hours to complete the MoTA labyrinth.
- Depending on the locale and the size of the labyrinth, you may need city or county construction permits, compliance with water run-off rules, meeting soil compaction standards, etc.

For More Information and Further Study

- [The Labyrinth: Walking Your Spiritual Journey](#)
- [Labyrinth Online](#)
- [Introduction to the Labyrinth](#)
- [The Labyrinth Society](#): This website has:
 - complete detailed descriptions of the various labyrinth styles
 - a labyrinth locator to search for your nearest labyrinth
 - check lists of things to consider
 - links to numerous other sources
- [Mazes and Labyrinths](#)
- *Walking a Sacred Place*, by Lauren Artress. Riverhead Books, 2006
- *The Sacred Path Companion: A Guide to Walking the Labyrinth to Heal and Transform*. Riverhead Books, 2006
- *Praying the Labyrinth: A Journal for Spiritual Exploration* by Jill Kimberly Hartwell Geoffrion. United Church Press, 1999

- *A Labyrinth Year: Walking the Seasons of the Church* by Richard Kautz. Morehouse Publishing, 2005
- *Labyrinths for the Spirit: How to Create Your Own Labyrinths for Meditation and Enlightenment* by Jim Buchanan. Gaia Publishing, 2007
- *Labyrinth and the Song of Songs*, by Jill Geoffrion, The Pilgrim Press, Cleveland (2003)
- A few of the many resources for finger or hand-held labyrinths to aid in personal prayer:
 - <http://handheldlabyrinth.com/>
 - <http://www.equinoxgifts.com/collections/labyrinths>



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Past issues of **GEMS** are archived at www.janetschaeffler.com

Additional ideas for Adult Faith Formation Planning and Best Practices can be found at:

- <http://www.ecatechist.com/ebooks/> Scroll down for *40 Tips: Getting Started in Adult Faith Formation*
- <http://store.pastoralplanning.com/iboplbeprfor.html> for *Parish Leadership for Improved Adult Catechesis*