

The McGiffert Roof

# Labyrinth



Information, Resources, and Guidelines for Use

*The labyrinth was installed on the roof of the McGiffert building by Kristen L. Mitchell in 2011 as a gift to the seminary community, to provide a place for contemplative prayer and meditation, as well as an opportunity to learn about this ancient design, its history, and the recent resurgence of its use as a spiritual practice and ministry both within and outside of the church.*

## ***Walking the Labyrinth***

Labyrinths are often confused with mazes in that both contain winding paths that create an overall sense of feeling lost. In a labyrinth, however, one is never actually lost. The labyrinth offers a **single path that always leads to the center**, while puzzle mazes emphasize choice and present dead-ends as consequences for wrong choices. Metaphorically, these two designs represent different ways of understanding and experiencing life's progression. As Rev. Lauren Artress writes, "the way to God is generous, and error, forgiveness, and grace, are all part of the journey." The invitation of the labyrinth is to trust the path, which is an act of faith. Sometimes when we feel furthest from the center, we are actually about to arrive there. Sometimes when we try to look too far ahead to figure out where we are going, we get disoriented and stumble off the path. These are just some of the many lessons that you may encounter on your labyrinth walk.

There is no right or wrong way to walk a labyrinth. Author and facilitator Sally Welch tells first-time walkers to "treat everything that happens to you on **the labyrinth as a metaphor** for your life." There are as many metaphors on the labyrinth as there are people to encounter, experience, and interpret them. The labyrinth is really nothing more than a physical container for prayer and meditation. Feel free to approach it from a place of total unknowing, with a curious mind and an open heart, accepting whatever you receive from the experience. Walk at your own pace. People have been known to dance, skip, crawl, or jog labyrinths. You may find yourself wanting to pause at certain points along the way. Listen to your body, and allow the Spirit to guide you.

The Christian mystical tradition offers a **threefold path** of "**purgation, illumination, and union**," which is often used as a model for prayer in the labyrinth: **release** what binds you as you enter; **receive** insights in the center; and **integrate** those insights as you move back out into the world. The labyrinth combines two spiritual paths of Christian contemplative practice: the *apophatic path* of silence, and the *cataphatic path* of prayer through imagery and imagination. Labyrinths can also help to mend the perceived divide between mind and body, or contemplation and action. The winding path of the labyrinth focuses and occupies the logical faculties of the left brain and the physical body as it weaves itself along the path, freeing our inner spirits to better hear the still, small voice of Divine indwelling, and to experience deeper prayer, intuition, self-awareness and compassion.

*Thus says the Lord,  
'Stand at the crossroads, and look,  
and ask for ancient paths,  
where the good way lies;  
and walk in it,  
and find rest for your souls.'*

~Jeremiah 6.16

### **Other possibilities for using the labyrinth:**

- Walk while holding the tension of a particular question.
- Walk with a prayer intention (i.e. walking for peace).
- Focus on a particular verse of Scripture to seek deeper understanding.
- Recite a meaningful mantra, song, or psalm while walking.
- Focus on the breath and body to calm your mind and center your heart.
- Take a ritual walk during times of transition when beginning or ending some aspect of your life's journey.

## ***Practical Resources & Guides for Labyrinth Walking:***

- Artress, Lauren. *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Practice*. New York: Penguin, 2006.
- Camp, Carole Anne. *Praying at Every Turn: Meditations for Walking the Labyrinth*. Crossroad Publishing, 2006.
- Geoffrion, Jill Kimberly. *Christian Prayer and Labyrinths: Pathways to Faith, Hope, and Love*. The Pilgrim Press, 2004.
- Geoffrion, Jill Kimberly. *Living the Labyrinth*. The Pilgrim Press, 2000.
- Kautz, Richard. *A Labyrinth Year: Walking the Seasons of the Church*. Morehouse Publishing, 2005.
- West, Melissa. *Exploring the Labyrinth: A Guide for Healing and Spiritual Growth*. Three Rivers Press, 2000.
- Welch, Sally. *Walking the Labyrinth: A Spiritual and Practical Guide*. Canterbury Press, 2010.

## ***A Brief History of Labyrinths in the Church***

Labyrinths are found in the history of both the Eastern and Western church. The oldest known church labyrinth is located in Algeria and dates back to the fourth century. At a ninth-century church in Lucca, Italy, a labyrinth was set into the stone of the entrance, upon which visitors traced their fingers before entering. Labyrinths did not become widespread in the church until the development of Gothic architecture in the middle ages. By the 12th century, labyrinths could be found in cathedrals throughout Europe. The most famous is located in the nave of Chartres Cathedral in France. Inlaid into the stone between 1194 and 1220, this labyrinth is believed to have been built according to the principles of Pythagorean geometry, which was considered a sacred path to knowing God.

Due to insufficient or contradictory written documentation, scholars have been unable to determine with any certainty the precise purpose these labyrinths served in the ancient church. References to the Minotaur in many church labyrinths seem to indicate that the pattern symbolized a Christian interpretation of the Greek myth of Theseus: Christ descended into Hell to defeat Satan and conquered death through his resurrection. The path of the labyrinth represents the way out of the maze. There is also evidence that labyrinths were used in some churches to symbolically take the place of a pilgrimage to Jerusalem when travel to the holy city was dangerous and impractical. Bishops in a certain part of France even led Easter dances on the labyrinth, and some believe that the path may have been used symbolically in some baptismal rituals. It is most likely that the labyrinth had a variety of different uses and meanings in various regions and church communities.

Part of the reason the historical details of this ancient practice allude us today is that the destruction of church labyrinths, which took place at the end of the 18th century, was almost total. The reason for their elimination is also uncertain, but we do know that it coincided with the rise of rationalism, the shift from Pythagorean to Cartesian mathematical thought, and the rise in popularity of a 16th-century invention: the puzzle maze. Interestingly, the recent shift *away* from modernist rational thought, towards chaos theory and postmodernism, has coincided with a resurgence of interest in the labyrinth. Many churches now offer labyrinths alongside ministries that educate people about its history and facilitate its use as a spiritual practice. Due to the lack of any specific doctrines or known historical conflicts surrounding use of church labyrinths, along with its presence in pre-Christian cultures, it has become a shared symbol and practice among ecumenical Christians and people of other faiths. Installation of labyrinths is also on the rise in secular spaces including hospitals, parks, and prisons, as more and more people begin to recognize the healing benefits of walking the path.

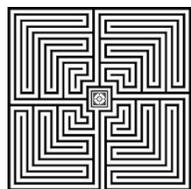
### ***Resources to Further Explore the History of the Labyrinth:***

- McCullough, David. *The Unending Mystery: A Journey Through Labyrinths and Mazes*. New York: Pantheon Books, 2004.  
Conty, Patrick. *The Genesis and Geometry of the Labyrinth*. Vermont: Inner Traditions Press, 2002.  
Jaskolski, Helmut. *The Labyrinth: Symbol of Fear, Rebirth, and Liberation*. Boston: Shambhala, 1997.  
Kern, Hermann. *Through the Labyrinth: Designs and Meanings Over 5,000 Years*. New York: Prestel, 2000.

### ***Labyrinth Symbols & Meanings***



Classic/Cretan design



Roman design



Chartres design

Labyrinth designs date back in human history over five thousand years. The oldest labyrinth design, often referred to as the “classic” or “Cretan” labyrinth, has a simple winding path of seven circuits, and lacks a pronounced center. The Romans later developed a square design with a path that moves logically through each of four separate quadrants. But perhaps the most geometrically and metaphorically compelling labyrinth designs were developed in the Christian church during the Middle Ages, with the most famous and intriguing of these being found in the nave of Chartres Cathedral in France.

The Chartres labyrinth contains 11 circuits that meander throughout the entire circle. The turns are formed by ten double-ax curves called “labrys.” These uterine-shaped bends form together the shape of a cross overlaid on the labyrinth. In the center is a the rosette, which is a traditional symbol of Mary and in the Christian church represents Divine Feminine energy and open receptivity to God’s will. The rosette is also a symbol of the Holy Spirit. Around the outside of the labyrinth are four groups of 28 markings called “lunations.” It is believed that these markings served as a method of keeping track of the lunar cycles, which were used to determine the date of the lunar feast of Easter.

*The McGiffert Labyrinth* is a variation of the Chartres labyrinth that has been modified to fit the roof’s spatial limitations. It contains only seven circuits and a smaller center, but the rosette has been included along with three groups of 28 lunations, to maintain the symbolic integrity of the original Chartres design. While a full Chartres labyrinth is 42 feet in diameter, and big enough to facilitate large group walks, the McGiffert Labyrinth is only about 20 feet wide, comfortably suiting about 1-5 people at a time. Please enjoy and care for this labyrinth so that it may be available to the Union community for many years to come!