

The Labyrinth

History of the Labyrinth

The labyrinth, a structure with one path leading toward a specific goal, has existed for over 3500 years. Labyrinths can humble as simple drawings in the sand, and as complex as installations in Roman temples and Gothic Cathedral. They have been found in a variety of areas including Europe, Africa, India, and the American Southwest. For thousands of years and for millions of people, the labyrinth has been a symbol of meditation and relaxation.

Christian Labyrinths

The labyrinth became popular in Christianity in the Middle Ages. Medieval Christians took the popular Roman designs of the past and altered them to be permanent fixtures in Christian churches. By the eleventh and twelfth centuries, the labyrinth became common on church floors in Italy. The labyrinth was also placed on the pages of books and other devotional materials to give people the chance to traverse them when away from the Cathedrals. The spiritual practice of traversing a labyrinth quickly found popularity in the churches of France and the rest of Western Europe.

The most famous form of the Christian labyrinth is based off the one in Chartes Cathedral near Paris, France. This circular labyrinth design contains four quadrants and which creates a circular design. This form of the labyrinth has been copied around the world and has a number of similar circular variants. It remains the most popular and iconic type of Christian labyrinth today. The most famous replica of the Chartes labyrinth is found at Grace Cathedral Episcopal Church in San Francisco, California. Other labyrinths also

gained popularity in the Middle Ages such as the St. Omer labyrinth. Unlike the Chartes labyrinth with its simple circular paths, the St. Omer labyrinth takes an almost random and meandering path through a square design.

Although labyrinths lost favor during the Reformation, they have recently regained popularity. Now, many Christian churches offer labyrinths during special seasons such as Lent and they can be found at Christian retreat centers. One can even visit websites to take a virtual walk through a labyrinth.

Walking the Labyrinth

In the past, the labyrinth was often traversed as a part of a pilgrimage, or done as an act of repentance. Although pilgrimages and penance are less popular than they were at one point in Christian history, labyrinths continue to contain spiritual significance for Christians. Walking the labyrinth has three parts: The first is the *Purgation* or releasing. This is a releasing, a letting go of the details of your life. This is the act of shedding thoughts and distractions by opening the heart and quieting the mind. The second part of the labyrinth is the *Illumination* or receiving. When reaching the center, one is invited to stay there as long as necessary for meditation and receiving God. The last part of the walk is the *Union* or returning. In this stage the person returns into the world to join with God. We hope that you will be refreshed and renewed by your journey through the labyrinth.

For more information you can visit the website of Grace Cathedral at www.gracecathedral.org or do a Google search for the Labyrinth locator.