

History of Labyrinths

<http://www.labyrinth.org.uk/index.html>

Labyrinth is an interactive installation for spiritual journeys. It's for anyone who wants a break from surfing the surface of culture to contemplate the deeper things of life.

Labyrinth reshapes a 12th-century ritual for the 21st century. Its maze-like path takes you on a symbolic journey, creates space to unwind and think - in particular about our relationships with ourselves, one another, our planet and God.

Designed for young and old alike, it provides a mixture of rituals and visuals, of contemplative words and contemporary ambient music, of symbols and media to help guide the spiritual traveller.

Labyrinths were a feature of many medieval cathedrals - one of the best remaining examples is found in Chartres Cathedral in northern France. Unlike a maze they have only one path - there are no dead ends. People walk the labyrinth slowly, as an aid to contemplative prayer and reflection, as a spiritual exercise, or as a form of pilgrimage.

This contemporary version includes music, meditations, art, media and symbolic activities at intervals along the path. Participants walk the Labyrinth with a CD player and headphones, in their own relaxing soundworld, at their own pace. Each track on the CD contains meditations, instructions and music relating to a part of the labyrinth [see [Texts](#)].

The path has three stages - the 'inward' journey, the centre and the 'outward' journey. The theme of the 'inward' journey is letting go of things which hinder our wholeness and inner approach to God. The centre of the Labyrinth is a space of meditative prayer and peace. The theme of the 'outward' journey is relationship - with ourselves, with others and with the planet - seen in the light of our relationship with God

About Labyrinths

Labyrinths and mazes



Mazes and a range of labyrinth designs are found all around the world in many cultures and civilizations. They are found carved in rock, ceramics, clay tablets, mosaics, manuscripts, stone patterns, turf, hedges, and cathedral pavements. The earliest known designs are about 3000 years old. The significance of them for the various cultures they were part of and the story of how they developed from one place to another (or simultaneously appeared in several) is often mysterious and hard to fathom. The most ancient and widespread design looks complicated but can be drawn quite easily if you know the method.

The labyrinth has since ancient times been associated with the legend of the Minotaur, the monster half-man half-bull which dwelt in the heart of a labyrinth on the island of Crete. Theseus was able to get to the centre of the labyrinth, slay the Minotaur and find his way out again by following the thread he had trailed behind him on the way in. But the story has caused confusion ever since, because clearly the Minotaur's lair was a maze that you could get lost in, whereas a labyrinth, however confusing it looks, has only one twisting path that weaves its way to the centre and back out again. There is only one entrance and exit, no dead ends, and no crossing of paths with a choice of which way to turn.

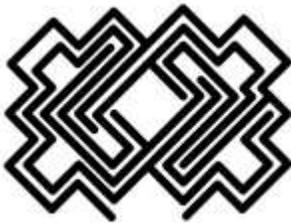
Cathedral Labyrinths



The Romans adapted the ancient labyrinth symbol as a decorative floor pattern, and the Christian artists and thinkers of early medieval times developed the Roman pattern into a new and beautiful form which was used as a feature in many medieval cathedrals. It was marked out on the floor in coloured stone or tiles and usually between 10 and 40 feet in diameter. A range of designs were explored, but the pattern used at Chartres Cathedral in northern France is the archetype and perfection of all medieval labyrinths. Fortunately it has been well-preserved, and in recent times pilgrims have taken to travelling to Chartres specifically to walk it.

Whilst we cannot be exactly sure what the labyrinths were used for, they were clearly a symbol of the Christian way, representing the path of the soul through life. Medieval pilgrims re-enacted this, following the path of the labyrinth in the cathedral on their knees as a means of prayer, or to symbolize the journey to Jerusalem, or as a ritual to mark the end of a pilgrimage. People walked it on the eve of their baptism or confirmation, as an aid to contemplative prayer in Holy Week, and as an illustration both of the life of the Christian and of the life of Christ. But after medieval times the spiritual uses of labyrinths were forgotten, and they fell into disuse. Many were destroyed between the 17th and 19th centuries.

Contemporary Labyrinths



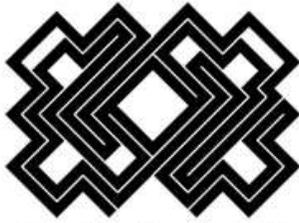
In recent years labyrinths have been rediscovered as a Christian spiritual tool, most notably through the work of Dr. Lauren Artress at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, which has had worldwide influence. The labyrinths of the current revival have mostly been based on the Chartres pattern, although often adapted to suit circumstances. Many of the new wave of 'alternative worship' groups and 'emerging churches' have incorporated labyrinths into the forms of worship that they are pioneering.

In 1998-99 a number of 'alternative worship' groups in the London area came together to work on an event to mark the Millennium in our city. Several of us had been involved in doing labyrinth services at a number of locations with a wide range of people and it was decided to make a labyrinth the main focus of our Millennium events. St. Paul's Cathedral let us use their south transept for a week in March 2000 as a venue. The opportunities and constraints of working in the cathedral meant that a new form of labyrinth was required, designed especially to fit the space and to offer the best experience to the tourists and pilgrims who would encounter it. Various groups of us worked on the music, the artwork, the words used in the meditations and prayers, and the design and layout.

The result is a contemporary version of a cathedral labyrinth which combines ancient Christian tradition with contemporary music, meditations, art, media and activities at intervals along the path. Several features are unique to the design:

- It is a new labyrinth pattern rather than one of the old patterns - with straight lines instead of curves which make it much easier to mark out.
- It incorporates 'stations' and activities en route.
- To walk it the participant listens to a series of music tracks with spoken meditations on a personal CD player.
- It blends the ancient practice of labyrinth walking with contemporary popular culture - music, televisions, computers and things from everyday life. This use of what might be termed 'icons of the present' suggests that the holy can be represented in the language of the here-and-now, of which popular culture is a significant part. God meets us in the stuff of everyday life, in the real world.

The result is not, in any normal sense, a church service, but an interactive environment resembling a contemporary art installation, self-evidently constructed and playful, with visitors coming and going as they please during opening hours. However, this installation offers more than an aesthetic experience - it will take you on a spiritual journey.



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texts

To see the texts for each stage of the Labyrinth, click on the number in the map.

Mosaic by Jenny Baker

