



## Labyrinth Walking: A Path of Reflection

*by Josie Padro*



A labyrinth is a simple circle made up of curving inner paths that lead toward the centre, then away, then back in again. Following the twists and turns helps many people match the physical act of walking with the mental, and often, spiritual practice of meditation. Labyrinth walking is catching on in health care settings, where the quiet, mindful activity is being used to complement conventional medical treatments.

Labyrinths have been discovered in early cultures as far back as ancient Egypt, and are found in some of the oldest churches in Europe. The most well-known of these is in the Chartres Cathedral in France, which is believed to date as far back as the 13<sup>th</sup> century. Unlike mazes, which are designed as puzzles, the path of a labyrinth is meant to lead people on a journey. Some view following the path of the labyrinth as a type of pilgrimage or a mirror of life's journey.

In recent years labyrinth walking has become increasingly popular with the circular patterns appearing in a variety of places, on church grounds, in public parks, in

hospitals. Today they are used as a tool for quiet contemplation or meditation, and can be a good alternative for those who have difficulty with convention meditation or who cannot afford to attend classes.

Medical research, so far, on labyrinth walking indicates that it produces health benefits similar to those of traditional mediation. That includes stress reduction as well as the physical benefits of walking, such as lowered blood pressure and breathing rates, improved circulation and muscle tone. Researchers point out that regardless the actual physical effects of the practice, the perceived improvement to quality of life is also worthwhile.

In 2009, St John the Evangelist Anglican Church at 220 West 8<sup>th</sup> built its own labyrinth. It was the shared dream of church members Deborah Foster and Wendy Middleton to have a labyrinth in their community.

Foster says the labyrinth, which is laid out in white paint and outlined with blue u-shaped lunations, is well used by the community. She points out that on any day she sees a variety of church and community members winding their way along the path—moms with toddlers, groups of teens, or elders.

The experience of walking the labyrinth is different for each person. Foster finds that people don't often share much about their experience. "They hold in their heart whatever takes place," she says. Those who do share report a range of experiences, from mild relaxation to profound peacefulness and self-awareness.

**There is no wrong way to walk a labyrinth, but generally, there are three stages:**

1. Release: stand at the entrance of the labyrinth and take several slow deep breaths, be aware of your feet on the ground. Deborah Foster suggests thinking of the thing that most concerns you and to actively let it go as you start into the labyrinth. Follow the path at your own speed and continue to let go of thoughts as they re-enter your mind.
2. Refresh: when you reach the centre, you may want to pause and reflect on your walk or continue to the outside of the labyrinth.
3. Return: continue to follow the path at your own pace. Feel free to walk the labyrinth as many times as you wish.

Deborah Foster believes spirituality can be interpreted in many ways and that the labyrinth at St. John the Evangelist is open to all. "It's a way of offering contemporary spirituality to the neighbourhood," she says. "Labyrinth walking is universal. You don't need a religion." In addition to the labyrinth at St John's the Evangelist, there are a number of public labyrinths in the Lower Mainland. Check out labyrinth locator, <http://labyrinthlocator.com> to find the surprisingly numerous labyrinths in our area.