

# Labyrinths' path to tranquility

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**BY BILL REINERT FOR THE COLUMBIAN**



Eunice Schroeder demonstrates how to walk a labyrinth at Vancouver's First Congregational Church. (Photos by Steven Lane/The Columbian)

Eunice Schroeder was grappling with a personal crisis 13 years ago when a friend suggested that walking a labyrinth might focus her thoughts and give her a respite from her troubles. At the time, she imagined herself stumbling about in a confusing maze before retorting, "Why would I want to do that?" Schroeder learned, however, that unlike the

deliberate puzzle of a maze, a labyrinth has only one path, a winding, circuitous one, that leads only to the center and back out again. Putting her qualms aside, Schroeder, who lived in Hood River, Ore., at the time, visited a labyrinth in The Dalles, Ore. She watched other people as she pondered entering the gently curving path, which, like her own life, was punctuated by twists and turns. A young woman pacing back and forth, attempting to soothe a bawling infant in her arms, caught her eye. Once the woman entered the path, the baby fell silent and remained so while her mother walked the entire labyrinth. While she recalls little of her own experience that day in The Dalles, other than intense emotion and focus, Schroeder said of the mother and child, "That I remembered!" Something mysterious had transpired. It had caused her to ask herself, "Why did it affect me so



Eunice Schroeder served as a consultant for two Vancouver labyrinths, including this one at Vancouver's First Congregational Church. (Steven Lane/The Columbian)

powerfully?" That question spurred a personal journey that led Schroeder to found Sacred Journey Ministries of Vancouver, through which she teaches spirituality at Marylhurst University in Oregon and recently held a workshop at Clark College.

### **Entering 'sacred space'**

At Schroeder's recent workshop, the students gathered in Clark College's O'Connell Sports Center gym where Schroeder, 59, set up a portable labyrinth using a 36-foot-wide, circular canvas painted with an 11-circuit design. Circuits are concentric circles, the labyrinth's curving paths, that project outward from the center. The portable labyrinth is modeled after a famous one painted on the floor of



Tracing a finger labyrinth can have a calming effect.

the Chartres Cathedral in Chartres, France. Schroeder's students performed their own contemplative rituals in preparation to enter the "sacred space" of the labyrinth. One stretched while another joined her hands, as though in prayer. Entering at respectful intervals, the students walked at their own pace, stepping aside to allow others to pass. Some paused during their journey as if in contemplation. One clutched a tissue to wipe away tears. All, as labyrinth etiquette suggests, walked in silence. Having completed their journey, the students spent a few minutes reflecting, at Schroeder's behest, before sharing their thoughts about their individual experiences. Metaphors and parallels with life that labyrinths typically evoke surfaced quickly. "No matter how many people we passed (along the path), ultimately we're on our own path, alone," observed Mary Riker, 71, of Ridgefield. "It's another form of keeping focused and keeping your mind in the present." Fifty-eight-year-old Dorothy Cottingham, who lives in Tigard, Ore., noted that the journey to the labyrinth's center required solitary participants to periodically encounter knots of fellow "pilgrims" before again finding themselves alone on the path. "We had to step out of each other's way and then we were alone again," she said. "We have to do it one step at a time, each of us." Karen Wynkoop, 61, of Vancouver, echoed Schroeder's observation that the labyrinth is a metaphor for life. "There are long stretches where (the

path) was flowing nicely, then there are the short and winding parts."

Schroeder counseled that the labyrinth "forces you to slow down and forces us to get in touch with another part of ourselves."

### **Prehistoric roots**

The spiritual allure of labyrinths is a global and, the evidence indicates, even prehistoric phenomenon. Labyrinths stemming from a few basic designs have been found in scores of cultures on several continents in such forms as rock carvings, sand games, wall paintings and wood sculptures, according to Di Williams' book, "Labyrinths, Landscapes of the Soul." The earliest known designs date back about 4000 years ago, according to Williams and other researchers. Since ancient times labyrinths have been associated with the Greek legend of the Minotaur, the half-man, half-bull King Minos had imprisoned in the heart of a labyrinth on the island of Crete. According to the legend, Theseus, a young suitor of Minos' daughter, was able to navigate his way to the center of the labyrinth, slay the Minotaur and find his way out by following the thread he had trailed behind him on the way in. The Minotaur myth has caused confusion ever since, Schroeder said, because unlike an actual labyrinth, the Minotaur's lair was a maze in which one could get



Eunice Schroeder recently taught a workshop on labyrinths at Clark College.

lost. Christians appropriated the Greek myth as their own, using the Minotaur as a metaphor for Satan and Theseus representing God, who is seeking out and slaying the evil monster.

### **Giant metaphor**

Labyrinths now are found inside and around cathedrals and churches throughout the world, including Clark County. Two in Vancouver in which Schroeder served as a consultant are at First Congregational Church and Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church. Schroeder, who lives in Vancouver, has noticed more interest in "all things contemplative and spiritual" since the advent of the nation's recent economic turbulence. "People are realizing that the assumptions they had about what was trustworthy and dependable — aren't," she said. "Seismic shifts like we are going through are mirrored in the unpredictable paths of the labyrinth." "This is all a giant metaphor," Schroeder concluded. "Are you in control or are you being led?"