

Clark County labyrinths offer opportunity for meditation

A meditative walk can start the New Year headed in the right direction

[Scott Hewitt](#)

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In this file photo from March 2005, Eagle Scout Peter Sterr, center, watches while friends and family paint a labyrinth pattern onto brick pavers at Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church in east Vancouver. (The Columbian files) **Photo Gallery**

It's the supreme irony of Eunice Schroeder's life: When a friend first invited her to try walking a prayer labyrinth about 25 years ago, she really disliked the idea.

"I don't think so. I already feel so lost and stuck," she told her friend. "I was very suspicious. It was a dark time in my life. Everybody knows what that's like."

But because Schroeder already was "a very spiritual person who was deep into interdenominational, interfaith kinds of things," she said, she gave it a try.

No information or context about labyrinths was provided that first time, and Schroeder said she left the experience untouched. "I remember thinking, 'OK, that was nice, but what's the point?' "

She reached the point on her second journey. An introduction to labyrinth history and purpose was provided for visitors, and that was all Schroeder needed to glean meaning and satisfaction from walking the winding path.

Permanent Clark County labyrinths

There are nearly 6,000 labyrinths in this world and nearly 4,400 in the U.S., according to the [World-Wide Labyrinth Locator](#).

They come in diverse styles: ancient or classical; Roman; St.

Omar or square-edged; and even a modern, copyrighted Santa Rosa layout that includes one small, symbolic "heart space" you're supposed to contemplate but never step into.

Clark County's four permanent labyrinths all mimic the most globally popular, medieval style found at Chartes Cathedral in France, Schroeder said. But three of them also streamline that design, with only seven wide layers (circuits) of pathway between perimeter and center, rather than 11 narrow layers squeezed into the same space.

Schroeder's own portable, canvas labyrinth, which she unfolds every New Year's Day at First Presbyterian Church, is a smaller version of the Chartes layout, with all 11 layers -- but it's 36 feet wide instead of Chartes' 42.

"Other than that they are really identical," she said.

The following Clark County labyrinths are all outdoors and accessible to the public, but check with the facility about open hours and other visitor details.

- Beautiful Savior Lutheran Church, 12513 S.E. Mill Plain Blvd., Vancouver; 360-254-9243. Installed as an Eagle Scout project in 2005.
- First Congregational United Church of Christ, 1220 N.E. 68th St., Vancouver; 360-693-1476. Opened in honor of Mary Jo Morse in 2006, it's the only permanent labyrinth in

Clark County that has 11 circuits, just like Chartes. "That's a beautiful one in a grove of trees," Schroeder said.

- Legacy Salmon Creek Medical Center, third-floor rooftop healing garden, 2211 N.E. 139th St., Vancouver; 360-487-1000.
- Southridge Community of Christ, 400 N.E. 179th St., Ridgefield; 360-573-5659. The newest addition, opened in September.

Two future Vancouver labyrinths are still on the way, according to Schroeder: St. Andrew Lutheran Church and Vancouver Heights United Methodist Church are planning permanent ones.

— *Scott Hewitt*

"It was a huge release from anxiety and depression," she said. "I cried and cried and cried. Something about it felt powerful to me, but I still didn't understand why. That's when I decided to go back to school."

Schroeder earned two master's degrees from Marylhurst University — in applied theology and interdisciplinary studies in spiritual traditions — and a Doctor of Ministry degree from San Francisco Theological Seminar, where her dissertation focused on labyrinths.

“My connection with labyrinths has changed the trajectory of my life,” she said. “They are the heart and soul of my life’s work.”

Schroeder is a leading local evangelist for the labyrinth experience via her business, Sacred Journey Ministries, and the host of Vancouver’s annual New Year’s Day labyrinth walk. She’ll unfold her 36-foot-diameter canvas labyrinth for everyone to try from 10 a.m. to 3 p.m. Wednesday at First Presbyterian Church on Main Street. That’s a free event and you are welcome to come and go as you like.

“We all need to go inside ourselves to hear our hearts,” Schroeder said. “We do that in prayer. We can do that with labyrinths also.”

Ancient

“I never get tired of studying labyrinths and learning about labyrinths,” said Schroeder, who tracks the development of local labyrinths and reports four in Clark County, with two more on the way (see sidebar). Stay up to date via a website called the World-Wide Labyrinth Locator (<https://labyrinthlocator.com/>).

Today’s growing interest in labyrinths took off in the 1970s, Schroeder said, as people started craving a direct, personal, spiritual experience that’s not anchored to organized

religion.

“More and more people are looking for spirituality outside of religion, or as an adjunct to religion. Fewer and fewer go to church,” she said.

For them, walking a labyrinth may be an ideal way to pray or meditate (or whatever you want to call it). While some Christians have adopted the labyrinth, it predates Christianity by millennia.

“The labyrinth is an ancient, primal, pre-Christian symbol” that goes all the way back to carvings on cave walls circa 3500 B.C., Schroeder said. It’s also found in ancient Greek and Roman mythologies.

The most famous and inspirational labyrinth of all is the one embedded in the stone floor of a cathedral in Chartres, France, and dated to approximately 1,200 A.D., Schroeder said.

“Used as a pathway of prayer, it afforded medieval pilgrims the chance to make a condensed version of the sacred journey to the holy city of Jerusalem without leaving their country,” Schroeder writes in Sacred Journey Ministries’ orientation materials.

On your way

In ancient Greek mythology, the labyrinth was intended as an inescapable maze — a prison for a monster.

The intent of sacred walking labyrinths couldn't be more different, Schroeder said. The point is never to lose, confuse or cage you, but to help you find your center and guide you on your way.

"It's not a maze," she said. "There is just one pathway in and out. You can't get lost."

The labyrinth is really a symbol of the journey of life, she said, and everybody's life is a little different. People use labyrinth walking for all kinds of reasons: to pray or meditate, to release troubles or stress, to process grief, to seek clarity or a sense of renewal, to find peace.

"It's all about your intention when you step into it," she said.

Don't worry about bumping into fellow walkers, stepping outside a line or otherwise making a mistake, because there's no such thing. Even as it twists and turns, life just keeps moving along, Schroeder said.

"In one setting you can experience your entire life," she said. A walker once reported to Schroeder that the inward journey through the labyrinth was contemplation of the past and the centerpoint was a place to stop and rest in the present. The way back out was the future.

“There is something mystical about the labyrinth that really works,” Schroeder said. “People come out of the labyrinth and come over to me and say, ‘Oh my gosh, I don’t know what just happened, but that was very special and very powerful.’

“It’s an excellent way to start the new year,” she said.

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