



THE LABYRINTH OF LIFE

Fiona Fidgin

FIONA FIDGIN, LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT OFFICER FOR THE METHODIST CHURCH, EXPLORES HOW WALKING LABYRINTHS CAN HELP OUR WELLBEING AND PRAYER LIFE.

A few years ago, I organised a 'Labyrinth Walk' for a conference run by the Scottish Association of Mental Health. This was the first time I had offered a walk to folk with serious mental health issues and one particular lady arrived and asked what was happening. I told her a little bit about the labyrinth and suggested how she might walk it. She promptly walked right in the middle and started by walking the path back out again at the time when most folk on the canvas were walking in. Realising half way through that she was passing everybody she stopped, looked around her and shouted in a loud voice, 'Am I going the right way?' I knew just how the lady felt.

I currently work for the Learning Network and much of my time is spent driving to and from venues. When I first started this job, I became addicted to my Sat Nav. I was always wondering, 'Am I going the right way?' It's a question I expect many of us ask.

We are all seekers, searching for a path to guide us in the right direction. During our lives we begin to ask fundamental questions of meaning, purpose and

value: Who am I? How do I find what I'm passionate about? What is my purpose on earth? In order to explore the path and direction that God is calling us to, we need to find a sense of stillness, to allow us to listen and to let the Spirit in as we search for answers.

A SPACE TO BE STILL

It's hard to find stillness in our modern world. Most of us are familiar with the chaos of a 24/7 modern life. Too much information clutters our lives, too many images claim our attention. The stories of our lives have become complicated and full of doubt. Anxiety lurks in the background of our lives, whether it be Brexit, terrorism, image, clothes, weight, social media... the list is almost endless. Recent research by the Prince's Trust shows that young people's wellbeing has fallen over the last twelve months. The results of the annual UK Youth Index, which gauges young people's happiness and confidence across a range of areas, from working life to mental and physical health should 'ring alarm bells', says Nick Stance, Chief Executive of the Prince's Trust (princes-trust.org.uk). No matter what challenges we are facing, we need to find ways to help us to stay centred, to find that quiet place inside, so that we can learn to quiet the outer world and begin to listen to our own inner world and wisdom.

For many of us, finding that place of stillness and quiet is hard. As soon as we try, our mind becomes full of distractions. To be physically still is not something

that comes naturally or easily to me. I can still hear the voice of my mum saying to me in Church, 'Fiona, keep still!' as the restless child in me struggled to pay attention or find a comfy spot on the upright pew. Most of us live our lives out of balance. We are too active when we long to be quiet. Indeed, we keep active because we fear the quiet!

When I discovered the labyrinth, I found a way that enabled my mind to be quiet and still, while my body was physically active in the walking process. I had found a way to calm the busy me but more importantly, I had found a path of prayer, a place where I could listen to God.

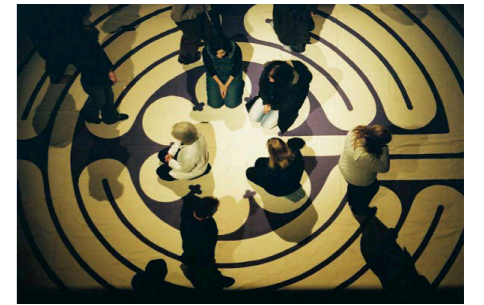
DISCOVERING THE LABYRINTH

I first encountered the labyrinth in the late 1990's at the Greenbelt Arts festival in England. There, a labyrinth had been marked out on the grass and a friend and I stumbled across it late one night purely by chance. It was hard to see where the path was as there was little light. We didn't have any instructions to follow, but we guessed that we were supposed to follow the one path weaving in and out as we journeyed to the centre. I grew up in London, fairly near Hampton Court, so I was familiar with the notion of getting lost in a maze and all the excitement and anxiety that came with that - but this was different. I became intrigued by the pattern and by the journey.

Soon after this encounter, several people based in London who were exploring contemporary worship, developed what



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they called an 'interactive labyrinth', which was housed in St. Paul's Cathedral for a week. Never one to miss an opportunity, I found myself following this labyrinth path, designed in the image of a Celtic key pattern, complete with headphones and accompanying music and poetry, to guide me through the journey. I adapted this idea and created a similar path which was first used in Edinburgh during Holy Week in 2000. This process was much more of a guided walk, with stations to follow along the way where folk would be invited to make some sort of response.

The reception this received was very positive, but I still felt that there was something missing from the jigsaw puzzle. The pieces finally began to come together when I found myself training to be a labyrinth facilitator with Lauren Artress, founder of the Veriditas, the worldwide labyrinth movement, based at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco (veriditas.org). Since then, I too have been using a canvas replica of the eleven-circuit classical labyrinth, the most famous example of which is found on the floor of Chartres Cathedral. I have offered labyrinth walks in churches, conferences, in schools and with organisations - the labyrinth is growing in popularity as more people yearn for quiet in our busy and frantic lifestyles.

WALKING THE LABYRINTH

Labyrinths are not mazes - they are not a puzzle to be solved. There are no tricks and no dead ends. There is only

one path that leads to the centre and back out again. That is what is different about the labyrinth and sets it apart as a spiritual tool. There are three stages to walking the labyrinth: releasing (walking in), receiving (at the centre) and returning (walking out).

Releasing - walking towards the centre is about letting go. The invitation is to let go of the things that are on your mind - worries, anxieties, to do list... Walking the twists and turns of the labyrinth helps to slow the body down and gradually the shedding of thoughts and emotions quiets and empties the mind.

Receiving - eventually you will arrive at the centre and here is the place of receiving. Many people sit or kneel here, it's a place to pray and to listen to God.

Returning - as you walk back out, retracing the path, you can reflect on and absorb any insights, words or images that may have come to you at the centre; how do they speak to your present situation? On the returning path, many people experience a sense of being more empowered to find and to do the work that God is calling them to do, a sense of joining God at work in the world.

Labyrinths are mysterious. We do not know the origin of their design or exactly how they provide space which allows clarity. It is an ancient spiritual tool that is being re-discovered as a tool to promote mental and spiritual wellbeing. In a busy-driven linear world,

the labyrinth enables us to quieten the outside world and listen to the inner world. It does not engage our thinking mind, but invites our intuitive, creative mind to come forth. As you walk into the labyrinth, each turn becomes a metaphor for the twists and turns in our own lives. The times when we feel close to God and the times when we feel flung out to the far desolate edges. There are times when we feel we are walking with companions and times when the journey feels lonely and isolated. As one person said to me, 'In our modern world we are surrounded by chatter - mobiles on the street, in the train, walking the labyrinth enables me to find a still place in this busy world. A place where I meet God.'

Fiona Fidgin works for the Learning Network of the Methodist Church and is currently studying part time for an MA in Digital Theology in Durham. She is a member of the Iona Community and has been offering labyrinth walks for many years.

