

CENTER *yourself*

You could find yourself in the middle of a labyrinth

Jim Beckerman NorthJersey.com | USA TODAY NETWORK



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“Labyrinth.” Not a word that sparks joy unless you’re a fan of David Bowie. ● It may also conjure up a picture of a bull-headed man devouring a beautiful maiden. Or maybe Jack Nicholson pursuing Shelley Duvall through snowy hedge-rows with a hatchet. ● Feeling relaxed yet? Actually, the labyrinths scattered throughout church grounds and public places across the country are – precisely – places where you can relax, de-stress, center yourself. ● You won’t find a Minotaur there. But you might find God. Or yourself.

"It really is, for us, a metaphor for your spiritual journeys," said the Rev. Ann Ralosky of the First Congregational Church of Christ in Montclair, New Jersey.

About 15 years ago, the church removed a number of pews at the very center of the sanctuary. In their place, they installed a 24-foot circle, with concentric paths marked out on it in stained wood.

These their parishioners walk – it's about a 20 minute exercise – but outside visitors are also encouraged to use the labyrinth during Wednesday visiting hours, 11 a.m. to 1 p.m.

"It has many twists and turns, just like our spiritual lives do," Ralosky said. "There are times when we feel we are making great progress. And then you will all of a sudden turn and double back and it feels like you are going back in your progress. But as we know in life, often it's when we think we are going backward that we are experiencing the most growth, or making the most progress."

On World Labyrinth Day, the first Saturday each May, people from some 75 countries gather together at 1 p.m. to harness their collective spiritual energy.

Whether or not these pilgrims, collectively wandering over their twisty roads, can make the world a better place, who will say? But one can only hope.

"This is celebrated literally all over the world," said the Rev. Shea Maultsby, senior minister at Unity of Sussex County, a nondenominational congregation in Lafayette, New Jersey, rooted in the "New Thought Movement." "There's a saying: 'We walk as one, at 1.' What happens is, we create a wave of peace around the world."

These kinds of labyrinths are not puzzles, nor are all church-affiliated. They are not designed to trick you, or lead you up blind alleys. Each has a way in and out that is clearly visible.

Indeed, to the fastidious, the word "labyrinth" specifically denotes a walk with a single winding route as opposed to a "maze" with dead ends and forking paths.

Labyrinths go back as far as ancient Egypt and Greece. The labyrinth of the Theseus myth, the one with the Minotaur, is thought to refer to palace of Knossos on Crete (c. 1900 B.C.), which was supposedly very maze-like. The word "labyrinth" derives from a Lydian word, "labrys," meaning "double-bladed ax" – the symbol of Knossos.



The Rev. Ann Ralosky of the First Congregational Church of Christ in Montclair, New Jersey stands at the center of a labyrinth. PROVIDED BY ANN RALOSKY

But the kinds of labyrinth that become popular now, in church gardens and public parks, have their roots in medieval Europe. For the Christian faithful in that period, it was a sacred duty to make pilgrimage to one of the holy sites – Tours, Canterbury, or the holy of holies, Jerusalem itself.

Such expeditions were difficult and expensive. Only the well-off could afford to make them. So the compassionate church fathers, for their rank-and-file parishioners, came up with a cheap alternative. A symbolic pilgrimage – representing the twisting winding journey to God and salvation. The labyrinth.

"It represents, to the Middle Ages, the answer to pilgrimage," said Barbara Butler, parishioner and volunteer at St. Martin's Episcopal Church in Bridgewater, New Jersey.

Many of the famous cathedrals in Europe, in the middle ages, had labyrinths. Chartres, Reims and Amiens all had them.

"You make it from the beginning to the center of the labyrinth," Butler said. "The idea is that it's a journey. Some people liken it to the Christian journey. You're on a path, and sometimes you're close to God – the center of the labyrinth – and sometimes you're not."

In other words, a kind of pilgrim's progress. At the center of the winding paths is Jerusalem. Or God, if you prefer. The point is to stay focused on the path – as we all must do in life. "If you follow that path you will eventually get to the middle," Butler said. "Just have faith in the path and it will get you to the center."

There are no walls in this kind of labyrinth. Not of brick, not of bush, and not of cornstalks your kids wander through at Halloween.

The winding path you are taking is meant to be metaphysical, not physical.

"The purpose of it, from a spiritual perspective, is to be a place where you can do a walking meditation," said Maultsby.

Their labyrinth, like many, is outdoors.

About a dozen years ago, congregants cleared a space in the group's 10 acres of land, and members brought rocks from their home to denote the borders. Some people, Maultsby said, when they reach the center space in the labyrinth, leave crystals, little crocheted hearts, other small tokens.

"It's a place where you can connect with God," she said.