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M A N A G E M E N T

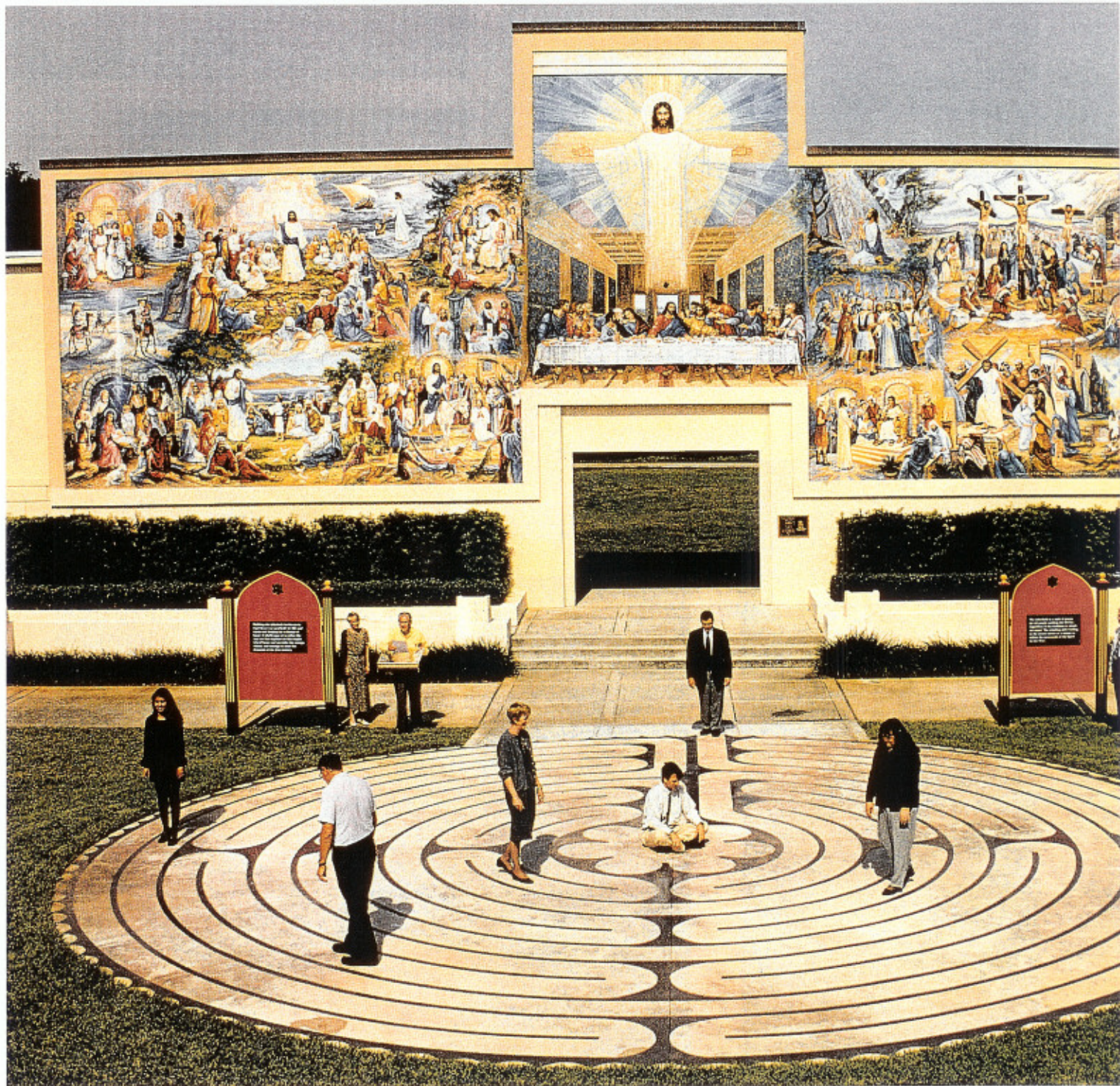
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A Prayer



In Motion

by Robert G. Neel, CCE

On a trip to the West Coast in the fall of 1997, Bob Neel, chairman of Woodlawn Memorial in Orlando, Florida, discovered the power of an ancient spiritual pathway called the labyrinth. Moved by his intensely personal experiences walking the labyrinth, Neel decided to bring its mystery and inspiration back home with him to Woodlawn. Less than 15 months later, he set up an outdoor masonry replica measuring 40 feet in diameter immediately in front of his cemetery's landmark Life of Christ Mosaic.

It was a few minutes after 8 a.m., October 25, 1997, when I entered the famous Grace Cathedral atop Nob Hill in San Francisco. I walked through its main doors. The bronze "Door of Paradise," as Michelangelo reportedly described them, are duplicates of famed Renaissance doors by Lorenzo Ghiberti (1401), made for the Baptistry next to the Duomo Cathedral in Florence, Italy.

As I walked around the baptismal font toward the nave, I almost stepped on a circuitous floor tapestry. I stopped short, noticing an attractive middle-aged woman thoughtfully walking a single pathway that meandered from the edge of the pattern to its center. There she paused, apparently in a state of prayer and meditation.

Several people stood at the side, and I asked a gentleman, "What is she doing?"

"She is walking the labyrinth—the sacred path, a prayer in motion," he patiently explained, pointing to a set of instructions near the entrance.

I looked back to the labyrinth. Others were now walking its winding path. A 12-year-old boy measured his steps carefully, placing one foot precisely in front of the other, heel to toe. A middle-aged woman led a blind companion, who held a cane in one hand and rested the other lightly on the woman's shoulder. A young girl glided gracefully as a crane, arms moving backward and for-

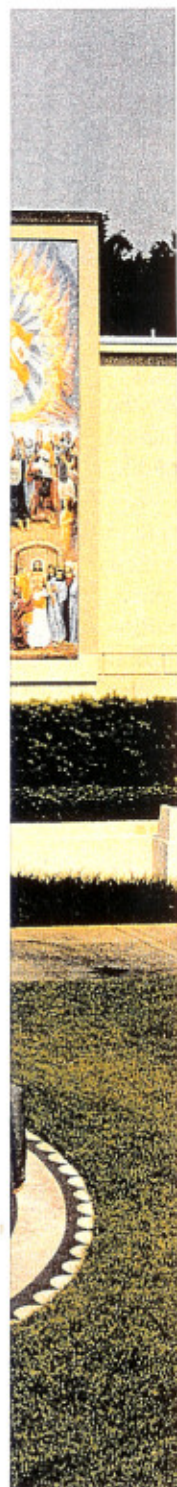
ward like wings. One man walked slowly, matching each step to his breathing. Another read inaudibly from the Book of Psalms. A toddler crawled along the path; when she reached a turn, her parents picked her up and pointed her in the right direction.

I studied the information signs on a giant pillar. The words assured me that the labyrinth is not a maze containing many paths, only some of which lead to the goal; rather, it has a single path that leads through the four quadrants of the circle into the center and back out. Those who walk it face no decisions or tricky dead-ends.

Labyrinths usually are painted flat on a surface, cut into grass or set with stones so the entire labyrinth is visible to all. Walking it can take anywhere from a few minutes to more than an hour, depending on the pace of the walker and the size of the labyrinth. The sacred walk usually is about a third of a mile and takes about 20 minutes.

According to tradition, a labyrinth walk has three stages:

- **Purgation.** The first stage, from the time you enter until the time you reach the center of the labyrinth, is purgation, cleansing and shedding, a letting go of the anxieties and details of your life. It quiets the mind.
- **Illumination.** The second stage, illumination, is when you reach the center. You may stay there as long as you like. It is a place of contemplation. Receive what is there for you to receive.



● **Union.** As you leave the center, following the same path out as you took in, you enter the third stage, union. In this stage you join the healing forces at work in the world and unite with one higher power. Each time you walk the labyrinth you become more empowered to find and do the work you feel you are reaching for.

A Sacred Journey

Labyrinths are found in various cultures and religions throughout the world. The Cretan labyrinth pattern is the oldest known on the planet, dating back 4,000 to 5,000 years.

Traveling to sacred places is a universal activity found in many religious traditions. Early Christians made a once-in-a-lifetime commitment to journey to Jerusalem. During the Middle Ages, the Crusades made travel to the Holy Land dangerous, so the labyrinth became a central symbol for this Christian pilgrimage. The pilgrims journeyed to appointed cathedrals and walked the labyrinth as a symbolic completion of their commitment. The center of the labyrinth in the pilgrimage tradition is called "The New Jerusalem" and the path, "The Road to Jerusalem."

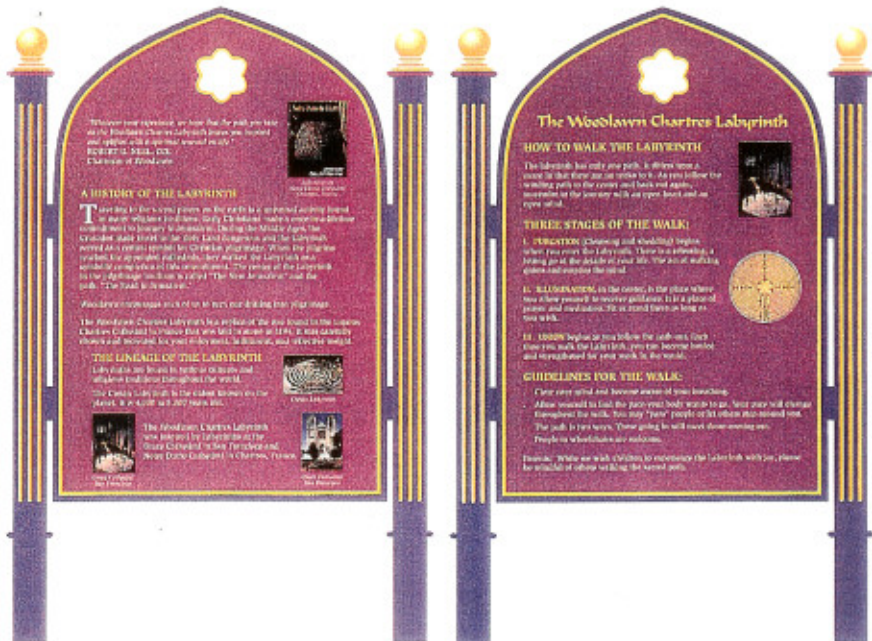
In recent years, the labyrinth has undergone a period of rediscovery, due primarily to the work of the Rev. Dr. Lauren Artress, who brought the labyrinth to Grace Cathedral in 1992 after a visit to the one at the Chartres Cathedral in France, which was laid in stone in 1201 and has become the most famous labyrinth in the modern world. Artress also has formed Veriditas—The World Wide Labyrinth Project, a group based in San Francisco that has helped tens of thousands of people rediscover the labyrinth and bring it into their communities.

The labyrinth has been the subject of several major media pieces in the past year, including a *New York Times* front-page cover story, segments on "ABC Evening News with Peter Jennings" and MTV and articles in numerous magazines. Upcoming features are currently planned for *Ladies Home Journal* and the spiritual segment of "Oprah."

Why is this age-old concept again capturing society's attention? In an article on the Veriditas web site titled "Walking Medieval Labyrinths in a Modern World," Peter Corbett writes:

One of the symptoms of spiritual crisis is a lack of centeredness, a lack of awareness of the spiritual nature of our true selves. Until our spiritual center is restored we will continue to drift as individuals and as a society. "We lost our sense of connection to ourselves and to the vast mystery of creation," writes the Reverend Dr. Artress, Canon of Grace Cathedral, in her book about the labyrinth, *Walking a Sacred Path: Rediscovering the Labyrinth as a Spiritual Tool*. "The web of creation has been thrown out of balance."

Many different forms of spiritual tools and meditations have sprung up in the past few years, and they all point to the search for meaning in our society, but the labyrinth seems to have struck a chord. It is a powerful tool, open to seekers of all beliefs. "The labyrinth is an



Attractive, colorful signs at Woodlawn offer photographs and information on the history of the Labyrinth and suggestions for walking it.

archetype of wholeness that helps us rediscover the depths of our souls," Artress writes. "We are not human beings on a spiritual path but spiritual beings on a human path."

In 1992, the Reverend Artress brought the labyrinth to Grace Cathedral in an effort to bring people back to their center and allow them to experience Spirit for themselves. It's been a tremendous success. Over a million people have walked the labyrinth at Grace Cathedral alone, with hundreds of other sites springing up across the country. Artress feels that walking the labyrinth can help us regain our spiritual base by emphasizing the intuitive, caring, and creative aspects of our selves and relaxing the logical, reasoning aspects which have been dominant in Western civilization over the last few centuries.

My Own Journey

Though I did not venture onto the labyrinth at the Grace Cathedral on that October day, the image of its path and the people walking it made a strong impression on me. Looking back, I think I knew from that very moment while standing in that inspiring cathedral that I wanted a labyrinth close enough so I could walk it often—one that the people of Central Florida could visit and walk to enrich their lives. Over a short period of time, I moved from curiosity to skepticism to profound respect for the uncanny gifts, insight, wisdom and peace the labyrinth offers. It connects us to the depths of our souls, allowing us to remember who we are.

In December 1997 I had my first opportunity to walk a labyrinth when my daughter Robin took me to walk the Conch Labyrinth at Ormond Beach, Florida. It has seven circuits instead of the normal 11. It is laid out on a knoll, and the paths are outlined with conch shells. I was motivated by a mixture of idle curiosity and scholarly interest. I was eager to learn more about the ancient spiritual tool. Besides, I was intrigued by the idea of walking on a sacred symbol.

My first experience left me unexpectedly moved and very puzzled. How could walking a meandering path make me feel so deeply centered? Since then I've attended a pilgrimage at the Grace Cathedral, "Walking Through Darkness and Light: The Undiscovered Country," conducted by the Rev. Artress, and I have come to better understand the power of this tool.

On the night of January 10, 1998, I had a dream—a vision of the labyrinth in place in front of the Life of Christ Mosaic at Woodlawn Memorial Park in Orlando. The Woodlawn Chartres Labyrinth is a replica of the one found in the Notre Dame Cathedral in Chartres, France. I walked it—the world's most famous labyrinth—in August 1998. It is the same sacred path "traveled" by those early Christians. While in Europe, I also visited the Basilica in Lucca, Italy, which has a labyrinth on an outside wall on which you trace the paths with your fingers.

Ideal for Our Industry

Why does the labyrinth attract people? It is a tool to guide healing, deepen self-knowledge and empower creativity. Walking the labyrinth clears the mind and gives insight to the spiritual journey. It urges action. It calms people in the throes of life transitions. It helps one find the inner self. It is a place to walk and meditate, solve problems and talk and pray to your God. Because of these positive benefits, I sensed that the labyrinth would be an ideal feature

for a cemetery or funeral home, and I wanted to introduce it to Woodlawn and the people of Central Florida.

In a New Year's 1998 letter to Service Corporation International employees in *Inside SCI*, Chairman R.L. Waltrip wrote, "Use the tools the company makes available, and invent new ones and enhance the quality of life in the communities we serve and say 'yes' to our families and communities."

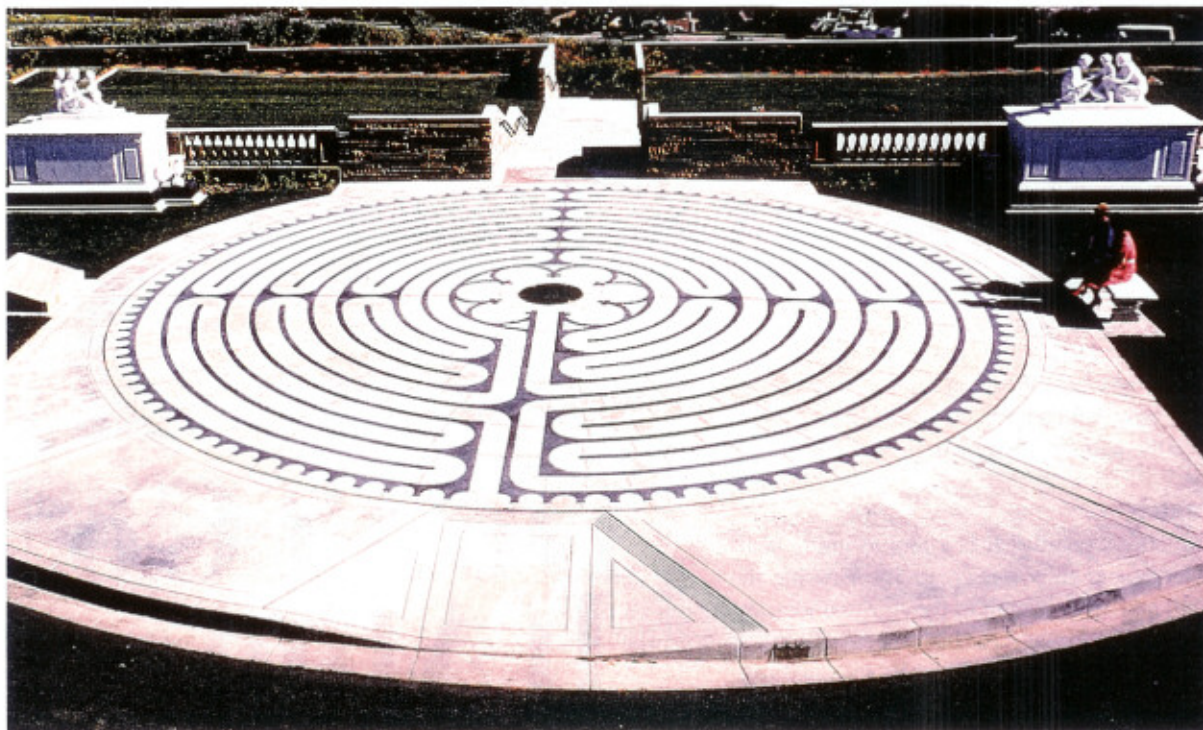
Well, the labyrinth project fits his challenge.

I asked SCI management to let me build a labyrinth, and they approved. It was obvious the labyrinth should be built directly in front of the Life of Christ Mosaic, one of the world's largest and finest religious mosaics featuring 23 scenes from Christ's life. Venetian Epler and Dauphine Huntington, two



Bob Neel visits the finger labyrinth at the Basilica in Lucca, Italy.

famous Hollywood sister artists, painted the Life of Christ mural and two mosaicists from Pietrasanta, Italy—Ferrari and Bacci—used 11 million pieces of Venetian glass to create the final piece.



The labyrinth at Forest-Lawn Memorial Park in Glendale, California.

The bronze medallion at the center features a bas relief of the face of the Chartres Cathedral. In the background are sarcophagi with sculptures constructed of carrara marble imported from Italy and commissioned by Forest-Lawn. Their placement on either side of the labyrinth ensures that one of the sculptures faces visitors throughout their walk.

Noel Merwarth, SCI vice president of construction, served as project manager and designer for the labyrinth. He had to master divine geometry to fit the winding paths on the 40-foot unique base, a replica in size of the labyrinth in the Chartres Cathedral.

On January 10, 1999—exactly one year after my dream—we held a ribbon cutting ceremony for the Woodlawn Chartres Labyrinth. Visitors received instructions on labyrinth history, how to walk the labyrinth and its many benefits. The Rev. Patrick P. Powers, dean of the Knowles Chapel at Rollins College in Winter Park, Florida, offered the words of dedication. Other participants included members of the newly formed Woodlawn Chartres Labyrinth Society and the Rev. Jeanne Miller-Clark, chaplain of South Seminole Hospital, which is home to a canvas labyrinth. The Rev. Miller-Clark read fascinating and motivating testimonials from labyrinth walkers.

The all-volunteer Woodlawn Chartres Labyrinth Society will guide the labyrinth operation. The labyrinth can be walked from 7 a.m. until sunset each day. In addition, the society will conduct special labyrinth events such as evening candlelight walks; lectures on the labyrinth, how to walk it and its benefits; and brown bag lunches and walks. The public will be invited to join labyrinth walkers from around the world for the New Year's Eve celebration in 1999 ushering in the new millennium.

The Woodlawn Chartres Labyrinth has been met with enthusiastic acceptance. A local Catholic nun, Sister Ann Kendrick, has brought several busloads of displaced farm workers and their families to walk the labyrinth. Sister Ann and the labyrinth have helped calm them and give them confidence in the midst of their transition. We have received many notes and letters showing sincere appreciation for the labyrinth. A local church has conducted its Sunday service at the labyrinth and the Life of Christ Mosaic and then walked the labyrinth all afternoon. Groups are calling and coming out every few days.

The labyrinth also has given our staff an additional tool to help families. When making their calls, our family service counselors tell families the labyrinth may help them as they work to manage their grief and deal with their problems. They leave them printed information about the labyrinth's benefits, its history, how to walk it and testimonials.

We have installed two handsome signs similar to the ones at the Grace Cathedral. One tells the history of labyrinths and the other how to walk the labyrinth. We also have printed material in an attractive receptacle, which we must be alert to keep filled. We have a sheet for visitors to fill out through which they can join the Woodlawn Chartres Labyrinth Society or tell of their experiences. Here are some testimonials from labyrinth walkers:

"I carried the picture of my deceased father to the center of the labyrinth. It was a beautiful sunny day. I had felt tremendous guilt and sorrow over our relationship over the past few years and was able to release that and move forward in my life."

—Beth

"Walking the Labyrinth is talking to God on a two-way street."

—Florence

Joe Smith, a UPS delivery man who comes to make deliveries says:

"For almost a year I had been in constant back pain from an automobile accident from the previous year. A fellow worker, Al Chircop, told me about the Labyrinth and suggested I take a walk. Well, I did and I have been walking ever since. It has transformed my life. It is the single best thing that has happened to me in the last 15 years."

"I walked the Labyrinth and discovered that I had forgotten about God."

—Mark