

Walking your way to calm

Local people find labyrinths offer spiritual pilgrimage

BY GARY HYNDMAN

staff writer

The signs of modern life are close by.

There's a large detention pond to catch storm water run off and the sound of cars and trucks rushing by.

But within the brick-paved boundaries of the labyrinth, pilgrims find an unexpected respite.

The labyrinth is located on the campus of Holy Cross Episcopal Church in Simpsonville. It was built by the 400-member congregation in 1999 and is open to the public.

"The first time I walked it I walked it with all the skepticism I could muster," said Mike Flanagan, who has been rector of Holy Cross for 11 years.

Now, he makes time to enter the labyrinth at least once each quarter. He usually walks it barefooted, enjoying the feel of the bricks beneath his toes.

Flanagan recommends it to others as a way to let go of distractions and restore a sense of calm.

"It's the sense it's going to be OK," he said.

The former engineer was introduced to labyrinths at an Episcopal retreat center in North Carolina by the Rev. Lauren Artress of Grace Cathedral in San Francisco.

Artress discovered a labyrinth inlaid in the stone floor of the Chartres Cathedral in France. She has written widely on the subject and is credited with introducing the concept to this country.

Pam Shucker, a local teacher and writer, studied labyrinths after the church she attends, First Baptist of Greenville, purchased a portable model. She said they pre-date Christianity, with the earliest datable one found in Greece around 1300 B.C.

After the Crusades interrupted pilgrimages by early Christians to the Holy Land, labyrinths were inlaid in the floors

of designated European cathedrals to be walked as symbolic spiritual journeys.

Where a maze offers multiple paths, the walker of a labyrinth follows a single circuitous path that leads eventually to the center. Practitioners compare it the journey of life, sometimes leaving one with the sense of being lost and far from one's destination.

"Part of the experience for me has always been to trust the path," said Flanagan. "If you trust in the path, it will take you to the center."

He said the experience varies depending upon whether you walk the labyrinth alone or with others, in silence or with music or during the day or at night.

Flanagan believes the labyrinth has potential as an inter-faith experience, since people of all faiths can benefit from walking it.

Shucker says she first walked a portable labyrinth her church borrowed several years ago because she was curious. But she soon discovered its winding path forced her to slow down, opening up its potential as a tool for prayer and meditation.

She said the reaction varies depending on what's going on in a person's life.

As the world gets more hectic, the public may be growing more receptive to the idea.

Furman University students and faculty recently laid a labyrinth near the school's chapel. Modeled after the design



Julie Turner/Staff

FINDING PEACE: The Rev. Mike Flanagan walks the labyrinth on the Holy Cross Episcopal Church campus that's open to the public.

at Chartres, its grass path is outlined with brick pavers.

Ann Quattlebaum, coordinator of Furman's Center for Theological Exploration of Vocation, said the idea originated with students who walked one on a visit to a Cuban seminary last year.

She said the labyrinth invites both contemplation and action.

It will be dedicated next spring and is open to the public.

Contact Gary Hyndman at 679-1226 or ghyndman@greenvillejournal.com.