

# Cambodian Labyrinth Experiences

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## Labyrinth Prayer in Southeast Asia Cambodian Labyrinth Experiences

In what ways is the labyrinth a universal and useful tool? What are the spiritual benefits of the labyrinth for those who lead faith communities? These questions accompany me as I install labyrinths around the world and listen to the stories of those who use them. This article focuses on the answers that I have discovered in the Southeast Asian country of Cambodia.



### *Considering the labyrinth*



When I traveled to Cambodia for the first time in 2012, I visited two important sites in the history of the nation, the Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum (formerly Security Prison 21), and the Cheung Ek Killing Fields, both of which were used for torture and extermination from 1975-1979. The genocide during that time, led by Pol Pot and carried out by the Khmer Rouge, resulted in the death of 1.7 million Cambodians.

### *Remains of those murdered at the Killing Fields*

At the Killing Fields, I literally walked over bones that were emerging from the ground. We were asked to respectfully place them in glass receptacles where they are gathered and later reburied. I also viewed exhibits that explained the history of the site and visited the memorial stupa with 8,985 skulls of victims. Then I sat on a bench in the humid Southeast Asian air and tried to process the thoughts and emotions that were overwhelming me. The words, “They need a labyrinth” bubbled up from my heart and mind. I recognized the thought as an invitation to return to Cambodia not as a tourist, but as a labyrinth builder and programmer.

The next day my husband and I met with a group that wanted to discuss the possibility of offering leadership training for pastors. I brought finger labyrinths for the organizers and introduced the tool which was new to all of them. After we ran our fingers over the path to the center and back out as we prayed silently, one of the leaders looked up and said in a clear voice, “We need this.”

*Using a finger labyrinth  
for the first time*



As the leadership team chose a venue for training in 2014, they sought a space that could include a walkable labyrinth. Once we arrived in the southwestern province of Sihanoukville, two Cambodians (who had never seen a labyrinth before) and I installed a masking tape Chartres-

style labyrinth in a carpeted meeting room. It took us about an hour and a half. During a break, the workshop participants came by and were curious about the pattern and the construction. None of them had any prior exposure to labyrinths.



*Creating the center of the  
temporary Chartres-style  
labyrinth*

On the second day of the training event, a visual introduction focusing on labyrinth experience was offered. A written introduction to labyrinth prayer had been translated into the Khmer language and was available in the workshop guidebook. After time for questions and answers, the group of pastors and church leaders, none of whom had walked a labyrinth before, took their time walking to the center, and when they had finished there, walking back out.



***Praying in the center of the labyrinth as others continued on the path***

I noticed several things. Shoes came off naturally before the men and women entered the sacred space of the labyrinth. They did not necessarily remove their socks. This was culturally appropriate since the same pastors take their shoes off before they climb the steps to the worship platform from which they preach. People felt at ease being close to others as they walked and many people fit naturally and comfortably into the center. I was also aware that as people entered the heart of the labyrinth they sensed that it was appropriate to drop to their knees, or find another posture that helped them to enter deeply into an intimate time of connection with God.

After everyone was finished walking, we invited people to share the emotions that they were experiencing. Their answers included the same range of feelings we have heard around the globe. They reported feeling afraid, awe, confident, confused, courageous, encouraged, excited, free, glad, happy, joyful, lightened, love, loved, relief, rest, sad, and strong. While joy was the most repeated answer, “more difficult” feelings were present as well.



***Debriefing after the labyrinth walk***





### *True repose*

After the session was over, most of the 40 participants went to another area for a break. Three participants remained. Two younger pastors lay down on the labyrinth and didn't move until they were called back to the next session after half an hour. One later told me that he had finally found a safe place to rest. An older pastor waited for the room to mostly clear and then went directly to the center. He sat down in a cross-legged position and prayed for some time. When reflecting on his time there, he spoke of the peacefulness he felt in the center and the way the environment of the labyrinth supported his desire to communicate with God.

Before the second group walk, I taught the group how to draw and build labyrinths. As I have come to expect when introducing the labyrinth in a new context, there was interest in the possibility of constructing labyrinths in other places. Several people mentioned that they hoped to build a labyrinth and share the tool with others. I gave one of them the measuring string we had used so that he could build a labyrinth for a group of youths.

### *After learning how to draw a labyrinth*



The evaluations at the end of the week include many comments on the importance of the labyrinth walks. In response to the question, “What did you gain this week that you most value from the training on being a Spirit-led leader?” participants mentioned such things as, “...to know how to be Spirit-led because of my experience on the labyrinth.” “The Holy Spirit touched me deeply when I did the labyrinth.” “...to have more inner peace in my heart by walking close to God during the labyrinth prayer.” “It has helped me to walk closer to the center that is God. The labyrinth helped me to know that God is the presence who is the Center and is waiting for us to come.”

In 2016 I returned to help with a leadership event in a different region of Cambodia. The planning team had carefully chosen a site with room for a labyrinth, but space was limited. We installed a labyrinth using the inner five circuits of the Chartres pattern. My co-creator was one of the same men who had built the labyrinth in 2014, so we were able to construct the masking tape labyrinth in about an hour.



***Placing the masking tape labyrinth on the tiled floor of a meeting room***

After introducing the labyrinth to the group of pastors and church leaders, we walked together and then shared our experiences. The next day I explained the construction process, and we walked together again. When asked toward the end of our time of debriefing, “What message are you taking from your experience almost half the participants’ answers included a Bible verse. Examples included, “Trust,” Jeremiah 29:11; “Keep my eyes on God,” Hebrews 12:1-2; “Love,” John 3:16; “Jesus is the way, truth, and life,” John 14:6; “Be courageous and strong,” Joshua 1:9; “Blessed is the one that does not walk in an evil way,” Psalm 1; “God is my provider,” Psalm 23; “My faith is a gift of God,” Ephesians 2:8-9; “God forgives me,” Romans 5: 8;

“I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me,” Philippians 4:13; “God gives life to the world,” John 6:3; and “I can trust God, I am being led,” John 14:6. The variety of the texts and messages that were shared, none of which had been mentioned in the presentations prior to the walk, demonstrates how the same path is experienced differently by each person who walks it. The prevalence of scriptural messages served as a reminder that what one brings to a labyrinth experience has a significant influence on what emerges.

***Praying together***



On the last day we had planned a final walk, but discovered that the labyrinth had been removed. Finger labyrinths, donated by Alain Kilar, a French photographer whose large image of the Chartres cathedral labyrinth worked wonderfully for this purpose, were used instead. Participants made the most of the opportunity, moving their fingers or the back of their pens slowly through the image as they prayed. Their faces during the experience and comments afterward demonstrated how meaningful this finger labyrinth experience had been, indicating the great value of this tool for spiritual meditation and prayer.

***Using a finger labyrinth  
to consider the meaning of  
what had been learned  
and experienced during  
the training***





Ninety percent of the participants reported experiencing God in a very meaningful way during their labyrinth walks. Two questions on the evaluations brought this out, “What did you experience this week that you value most?” and an empty space asking for additional comments after a rating (very satisfied, satisfied, partly satisfied, not satisfied or not applicable) of the spiritual practices included in the workshop, including labyrinth prayer. When submitting a final report, the Cambodian leadership committee also mentioned that “participants were touched deeply and realized they were having an experience with the Holy Spirit when they walked the labyrinth,” “Many reported having inner peace deep in their hearts as they walked closely with God on the labyrinth,” and “Many expressed in writing that they were able to seek God’s presence through their labyrinth experience.”



*Closing prayer after a labyrinth walk and debriefing*

Participants wrote, “God is my center. I can find God whenever I take the time to listen, quiet myself, and pray. I need to create space time and space to learn how to be closer to God.” “Labyrinth prayer encourages me to be closer to God than to be self-centered. I am so encouraged and willing to serve God when I know that God wants to communicate with me as God did on the labyrinth.” “Now I will strengthen my church to understand more about walking with God daily.” Several also spoke about wanting others to know about labyrinth prayer. For example, one participant wrote, “Labyrinth prayer is a new experience for me. I want to bring it to my church so that we can use this helpful practical tool to seek God’s will together.”

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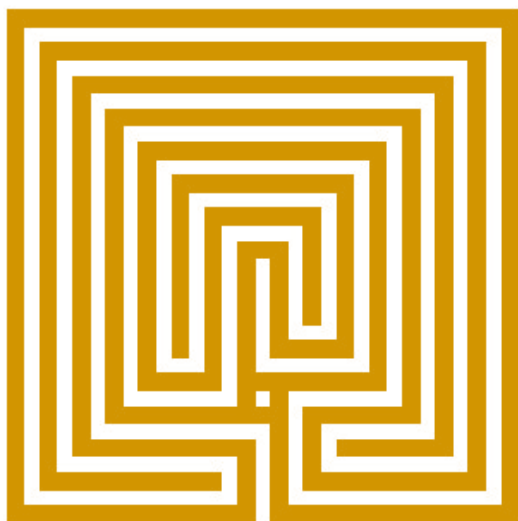
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