

Labyrinth Prayer, HEAL Africa Goma, D. R. Congo October 2007



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MAP OF AFRICA,
CONGO AND GOMA



“What is clear is that fabric of life continues to be torn apart. Trust, peace, and the ability to pursue a normal life’ seem still a mirage. What always amazes me is that there is no end of guns and ammunition.



It seems that the only hope for real peace is talks among the parties involved and a political settlement. Presidents Kagame and Kabila will meet Friday the 7th, with other Africa heads of state, in order to pursue a solution. Please keep them in mind and heart.”

HEAL Africa Email

Current “military situation” (war zone) in Goma, Congo



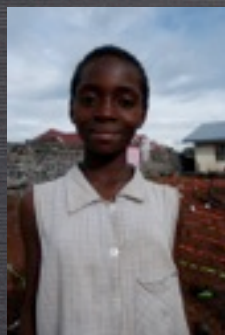
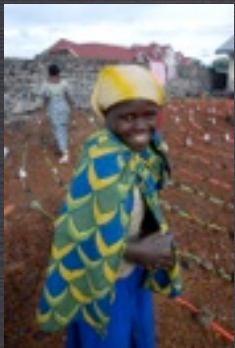
Parking area where the labyrinth was built.



Beginning to lay out the labyrinth...



Alain, age 12, (in the red & white shirt) and other children wanted to help too. We laid out the labyrinth's circles together using a measuring cord and flags.



Many helped to create this lava labyrinth.



The smoking Nyiragongo Volcano

The paths of the labyrinth were made of crushed lava. Dividers were made from larger pieces of lava. Life in Goma could easily be described as "suffering upon suffering."

The lingering effects of the civil war from 1998-2003, the ongoing problems of "security" caused by warring militias, the refugee camps for internally displaced persons with all the misery they hold, the lack of governmental infrastructure or help, soaring inflation, widespread poverty, hunger...these problems affect nearly every resident in overwhelming ways.





“What is this?” “What does it signify?” “Oh, it’s beautiful!” (my favorite) “Is it a spider’s web?” I explained, “It’s a pathway of prayer. Come back when it’s finished, and pray it!”



One of the blessings of building a labyrinth is being able to use it. I walked the newly constructed labyrinth after asking God, "Please show me what you want me to see." "You can't see what you need to see with your eyes," the message came. "Then how can I see, God?" "You must look with the eyes of your heart." My response followed naturally, "Open the eyes of my heart..."





By afternoon, spontaneously, neighbors, patients and curious by-passers at HEAL Africa began to walk the labyrinth.

Women and girls with fistulas (abnormal openings between organs) are often shunned by their husbands, relatives, and communities. While living at HEAL Africa they learn skills that will help them support themselves and their families when they return to their villages.

Children enjoyed the labyrinth, as they always do! These boys walked and ran it many times. Most of these kids lived nearby. Some test positive for HIV/AIDS and are receiving antiretroviral medications and food so that the drugs will be effective. I was so happy that they could experience a safe, spiritually supportive environment where they could enjoy themselves and each other.



One of my helpers, an energetic boy who was about ten years old, told me he wanted to pray the labyrinth. Through a translator I asked, "What would you like to pray for?" "I want to be a pilot when I grow up," he explained. "Great!" I replied, wondering if it could ever be possible, but not wanting to discourage him. "Talk to God about it as you pray on the labyrinth." He walked to the center, and then followed the path back out. After he exited, I asked, "What did God say to you?" "He told me, "God told me that I need to stop doing the bad things I've been doing, and to walk with Him if I want to get to my goal." "You've been shown the way..." I responded, amazed at what had transpired.



The first time they saw the finished labyrinth, during a break (notice the orange sodas they are holding), some of the pastors decided to try it.



This man, a construction worker from the building near the labyrinth, took a personal interest in it. He wanted others to respect the pathway of prayer. He would chase kids away (to my horror) if he thought they were being too rambunctious on it. When others would walk the labyrinth, I would see him watching, as if trying to understand more. Unfortunately, my Swahili limited my ability to learn about his experiences and interest but we exchanged big smiles whenever I saw him walking it, or he saw me walking it.



Women cooked on both sides of the labyrinth. The seminar “kitchen” was on the left. Hospital patients built fires on the right next to their dormitory.



I invited one of the cooks for the pastors' seminar to pray the labyrinth. She said she was too busy with her chores. I suggested that just being near the labyrinth and watching others walk it was a way to experience it. She said she knew what I meant. She really liked the labyrinth, and liked being near it. "It is a good path," she told me.



Bishop of the Kivu Districts. Women are their cooking dinner in the background.

While waiting for his ride the first night, an Anglican Bishop watched another pastor walk the labyrinth. He approached the threshold, prayed for some time, and then walked slowly to the center and back out. When he was done, he commented, "This is a good way to pray."



Jean Paul (grey shirt), a construction foreman, walked the labyrinth after work. He had no introduction to it. The next morning he sought me out. "When I prayed the labyrinth, I realized that even though there are many challenges, and different things happen, the important thing in the spiritual life is to keep going. Perseverance is necessary." He felt stronger to face the challenges in his life. He wanted to know if I could give him a copy of the design so that he could build a permanent labyrinth that would inspire churches, schools, and others to build other prayer labyrinths. He was particularly interested in how labyrinths might be a resource to help youth grow closer to Christ. Later, he asked for more information.

Pastors sometimes used their breaks to pray the labyrinth by themselves.



Pastor Gaston was deeply moved by his labyrinth experiences. He left the seminar with plans to construct labyrinths at his church and the schools related to it.



The center of the labyrinth was a special place for both children and adults! Many people asked me to take their pictures in the center.



Although built as a tool for the pastors' seminar, the labyrinth belonged to the whole community. I prayed it a couple times each day, and often went by to see what was happening there. Sometimes, to my delight, someone would ask me to pray it with her or him. Some needed assurance that they were walking the labyrinth "correctly." For those who weren't sure what to do at turns, I walked behind them, and helped with instructions when they were needed. Some people just wanted to share the path. Whether we walked in silence, prayed out loud (quietly), or sang, it was a joy to walk to the center and back out together.



Theological graduate & Chaplain's assistant, Esther



On this walk that I shared with these children, we sang, "We are going to Canaan/Unaenda kanana..." (my choice) on the way in. Walking out we repeated, "Marche, marche, marche..." (their choice)!



Some of the medical staff from the nearby HEAL Africa Hospital walked the labyrinth on their way to and from work. This man told me, "As I walked, I saw the way was long and very difficult. Then I realized that what needed to change was my attitude. The way was long, but I had the possibility of choosing what I thought about it."



One of the HEAL Africa interns who was teaching research methodology to the hospital staff reflected on her first labyrinth walk.

“It was very peaceful. It gave me the space to think about things I haven’t really had time to think about. While on the labyrinth I also became aware of many things that I want to pray about.”

Eve, premed student from Washington D.C.



Women waiting for fistula repair surgeries watched everything. Sometimes, they came to walk the labyrinth. Unfortunately my swahili wasn't good enough to hear much about their experiences. After walking to the center and back out together, the woman with the red scarf found a translator who relayed what she wanted me to know, "This is the path of my life. I am walking to God."



The labyrinth was a shared space, linking the pastors attending their seminar with the rest of the community at HEAL Africa. One afternoon, I walked out of the Jubilee Training Center to see a seasoned pastor walking with the children who lived nearby. It was truly a heart-warming sight.



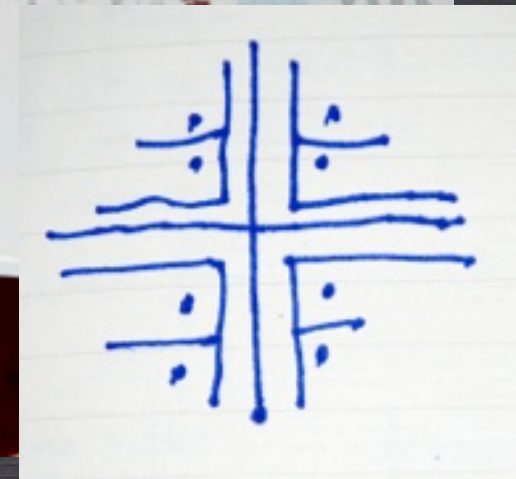
As part of a unit on “Aligning with God’s Purposes in Life and Leadership” the pastors and other spiritual leaders were formally introduced to the labyrinth on the third day of their seminar. Then, they took time to pray it, individually, but in community.



Afterwards, several pastors who were out by the labyrinth drawing a sketch of it asked, “How do you make this?”. I began to show them. As I outlined the seed pattern and steps to follow, more and more pastors gathered around. That’s when I realized I needed to teach everyone how to draw (and hopefully build) a labyrinth. Many thanked me afterwards, promising to send word when they had built a labyrinth in their community.



Seminar Teaching Area (Upper photos show different seminar activities)



Later, I observed people drawing out the 3 and 7 circuit labyrinth patterns I had shown them. Benaya Muhindo Kataka and Doma Marie Leontine figured out the seed pattern for the 11 circuit Chartres pattern I had used to build the HEAL Africa labyrinth (on the right) and demonstrated to others how it worked.

Women participants of the ecumenical seminar spoke of how they used the labyrinth for discernment, contemplation, and worship.



Sr. Leontine, Catholic sister; Nganza, Baptist Evangelist; Agnes, Nazarene Evangelist
(Denominations that don't ordain women call trained church workers that are women "evangelists.")

Others described the significance of their labyrinth experiences during group sessions.



“The spiritual life is a long trajectory. On this journey we often encounter difficulties that discourage us. And often we go around in circles. But when we have courage, we arrive at our destination. God is with us on this walk, and we will finish by arriving in the center.”

Rev. Bizimana Mulera
Gaston

“My experience was fixed on one objective: I started at the beginning and was focused on going towards an end. When I was on the labyrinth, all distractions disappeared. I was connected to God. My experience was characterized by a connection with God. I also felt that I was one with the others, especially with the others who were with me in the center.” Kavira Nganza.



“Some of my friends had already started walking the labyrinth. I was going at a different pace, but when I got close to them, I wanted to go at their pace, so that we could walk together. I was supporting them. I felt calm and prayerful the whole time I was on the labyrinth.”

Minduli Mulanda.



“I experienced the joy of finding myself closer to God when I prayed the labyrinth. As I walked, a song came to me, and I sang it the whole time. I feel its message of love is what is going to be realized in my life. I have been given a new vision for my ministry.” Seminar Participant.



As I walked, I sensed that God reveals himself in our weakness.
In spite of my weakness, God is inviting me to grow.”
Jacob B. Lipandasi





“When I was on the labyrinth, I felt like an old pilgrim walking. I was sure that one day I would arrive.

It was important to have God as my focus as I walked.

I received the assurance that I needed for my life, and for others I care about.

I feel that I should construct a labyrinth where I minister.”

Rev. Bahaya Gustave





“When I was walking the labyrinth, I became aware that there was a part of me that wanted to serve myself instead of God. When I realized it, I stopped right there, and asked for the grace to get back on track.” Pastor.

“While I was on the labyrinth a song came to me. ‘You are never alone, no never alone...’ I was singing that song the whole time I was walking.” Agnes Uwimana Ibanda



While people prayed the labyrinth, there were often others who watched with interest or curiosity. I introduced the idea of praying for others who were walking the labyrinth in my second presentation to the pastors and other spiritual leaders.





“After I was done, I noticed how many pilgrims there were still in the labyrinth, and I prayed for them. When I went back into the labyrinth, I saw how many people were on the outside of the labyrinth, supporting me and encouraging me to keep going. We are together in this prayer. Although we walk by ourselves in the labyrinth, there are others there, and we are all close in prayer.” Myatsi Waiko Seraphine.

After one of the group walks, a pastor asked to talk privately. “While we were praying on the labyrinth, I was totally preoccupied with my need for forgiveness. Twenty years ago...” As he told me more, he described how he had sought forgiveness--from those he had wronged, from others that were affected, and from God. All that remained was for him to forgive himself. The labyrinth walk had prepared him to be set free...at last.





Another pastor asked to make an appointment to speak with Tim and me when others wouldn't be around. On the labyrinth things had begun to become more clear... Changes were needed. Changes that had not seemed possible before. We cried together, and we prayed together. Through the use of the labyrinth, God had provided a new perspective, and a new willingness to hope, to chose wisely, to act differently... When we returned a year later, the pastor reported concrete changes.

Some of the pastors expressed surprise at how meaningful prayer had been on the labyrinth. "When I first saw the labyrinth, I wondered, 'What is this strange thing?' Now, I want build a labyrinth in the garden of our church." Rev. Gustave.





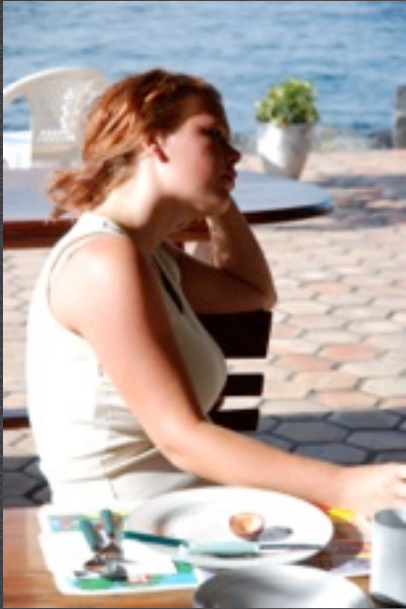
The last day, some of the pastors wanted me to join them in the center of the labyrinth to have our picture taken together. It was my joy to share the center one last time. Watch the world-wide labyrinth locator (<http://wwll.veriditas.labyrinthsociety.org>) for new labyrinths in the Democratic Republic of Congo.



AIDS orphans walking a labyrinth built by their school. Buvaku, Congo
They use the labyrinth often,
especially because they don't have other "play" spaces.



The teacher, who I have never met, wanted to express her appreciation for the labyrinth. She stitched this "Thank You Labyrinth" as way to pray the labyrinth more deeply. She copied the pattern from a paper labyrinth diagram that her pastor brought back from our seminar.



I felt sad that I never was totally able to “finish” the labyrinth. If I had had more lava rocks close at hand, as well as more time, energy, and helpers I would have covered all the tape with lava rocks. When I mentioned this to Christina, an Australian intern at HEAL Africa whose college major was sculpture, she said she would be delighted to do it. “I never thought much of the plastic tape!” she commented. Two weeks later, another woman, who had not been there when I was, emailed me to say the labyrinth had been finished. She attached this picture.



Later, the labyrinth area was landscaped and the labyrinth covered over. Of course, I wish the labyrinth was still there, but it was only for a season. However, other labyrinths have been built in the Democratic Republic of Congo by those who experienced the Goma labyrinth. This minister asked for a directions on how to build a Chartres-style labyrinth. "You never taught us!" he reminded me.



Others labyrinths are in the planning stages. This Anglican Pastor, Désiré Mukaiwa, is excited about building a labyrinth between this church and elementary school. God willing, I will be working with the women of the congregation on this project in January, 2010.



We have offered to install a labyrinth and do labyrinth programming with the students of the Université Libre des Pays des Grands Lacs in Goma, Congo. The president (second from the right) is interested in learning more.



Building this prayer labyrinth and sharing it with others was one of the great joys of my life.

I am still marveling at the wonderful ways in which God used this labyrinth to comfort, inspire, connect, encourage, and challenge those who used it.

I am deeply grateful.

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“God, You show me the path of life. In your presence there is fullness of joy; in your right hand are pleasures forevermore!” Psalm 16:11



Please join me in a minute of prayer for those you have seen in this presentation and all the people of Eastern Congo during this time of deep instability. www.healafrika.org