

Labyrinth Prayers for Healing in Myanmar

Jill Geoffrion

When Dr. Sang Awr, a professor of Practical Theology and national Church leader in Myanmar was in Singapore seeking medical treatment for the late-stage cancer that was ravaging his body I received a visitor from Burma at the Deep Haven Retreat Center where we live and minister in Minnesota, USA. One morning she went out to pray some of the ten labyrinth prayer circles that dot the property. I asked her, "What are you praying for?" She said, "For the healing of Rev. Sang Awr." Since the news from his doctors wasn't hopeful, I admired her great faith. After about an hour in prayer, she told me, "Now I really feel that God will heal Sang Awr." Quite frankly, I didn't know what to think. It seemed impossible, and yet it was what we were all hoping for. And of course, with God, all things are possible.

We can give great thanks to God that Rev. Sang Awr's cancer was brought under control and he has been able to regain the ability to walk and minister. He now works each day on a biblical commentary for the Chin people of northern Myanmar. When I was in Myanmar I heard him preach about his unexpected experience of being healed.

The question that I often consider is this: How can labyrinth prayer support our needs for healing? It is helpful to remember that the medical community differentiates between "curing" and "healing." Curing involves the physical cessation of disruptive physical symptoms of illness. Healing involves a shift from physical, mental, emotional, spiritual, or other types of dis-ease toward wholeness. Terminally ill patients sometimes speak of being healed, even when they are not cured.

While I do not believe it is beyond God's ability to use prayer, including labyrinth prayer, to cure an individual's medical illness, experience makes me far more at ease speaking of the many experiences of healing that have taken place during labyrinth prayer.

Introduction to Labyrinth Prayer in Myanmar

The forty-two foot labyrinth at the Myanmar Institute of Theology was created by faculty, staff and students of the seminary in January 2009 for the purpose of enhancing the spiritual life of this community. Those who laid the pattern into the ground asked Christ that this labyrinth would be used as

a means of connecting those who used it with God. At its formal dedication in March, 2009 the community prayed:

- That those who use this labyrinth will experience Your presence, O Christ.
- That all those who come to the labyrinth in pain or longing will receive what is needed from You.
- For the courage to pray for fresh starts and for Your transforming grace.
- May this labyrinth path, where the beginning is also the end, teach us to see, think and feel the unity of all You have created and all You are.
- May all who come to this labyrinth be satisfied by meeting with You here.
- May those who experience this labyrinth be illumined by Your presence. May Your guiding light shine in them and through them.

Each of these prayers relates to one or more types of healing. Let us now consider how people reported that labyrinth prayer has made them more whole. Since this article is meant to honor Rev. Dr. Sang Awr, I have chosen to use examples of those praying the labyrinth in the Myanmar context exclusively.



The labyrinth at the Myanmar Institute of Theology

Physical Healing

Medical teams are currently conducting research to better understand the physical changes that occur during labyrinth prayer. Their scientific conclusions have not yet been documented, so for the moment we can only rely on anecdotal information. While in Myanmar I have heard two stories of physical healing during labyrinth prayer.

The first occurred when a man in his late thirties followed the labyrinth pathway with his finger. Prior to this exercise he had been "experiencing irregular heart beats for between two and three weeks." Much to his surprise, as he prayed the labyrinth, his heartbeat returned to a regular pattern.

The second experience of healing was reported by a medical doctor in her seventies. While she feared walking the labyrinth in the hot sun due to weakness of her heart, she found she was able to complete the entire twenty minute walk in the ninety degree sun with no negative side-effects. To her great surprise, her blood pressure remained normal throughout the time she was praying in the labyrinth. She reported feeling "lifted up" as she walked, something she had never experienced before and wasn't sure how to understand.

Although we need concrete scientific documentation that measures the physical changes and states of those walking the labyrinth, for now we can say that some people experience their health being enhanced in significant ways due to their prayer with labyrinths. One woman stated, "Because of my high blood pressure, I need to walk regularly. Praying the labyrinth will help me stay healthy."

Emotional Healing

Reports of emotional healing that occur during labyrinth walks abound! During a pastors' leadership conference sponsored by the Judson Center, one participant explained with gratitude in her voice, "While praying the labyrinth, I was released from stress bondage." After a group of lay women came to pray the labyrinth together, many of them spoke about how they arrived feeling burdened, but left feeling great joy.

During a workshop on Labyrinth Prayers for Peace one participant shared with others how she had experienced comfort in the midst of grief due to two deaths that had occurred in the past week. This was an unexpected and welcome outcome of the time she had spent on the labyrinth. Such experiences of transformation of emotional states are commonly reported whether the labyrinth walkers are in Asia, Europe, Africa, the Americas or elsewhere.

Spiritual Healing

Praying while moving on the labyrinth often results in changed understandings and experiences of one's spiritual state. During each time I was privileged to introduce labyrinth prayer experiences in the Myanmar context, I heard accounts of how people had felt that God was walking with them. Although this was not necessarily a new idea to them, their experience of its truth seemed to have been realized at significantly deeper levels. Their ability to trust God had grown organically out of this prayer of moving on the labyrinth pathway.

Others spoke of coming to new and deeper understandings of their own guilt, need for forgiveness, and hope in God's mercy. The call to align oneself more fully with God was heard and embraced.

Some people were surprised to find themselves overcome with a desire to sing of God's goodness or praise God in other ways. Reports of spontaneously beginning to recite the Lord's Prayer or Psalm 23 were accompanied by a sense of gratitude for the way in which doing so brought a significant sense of connection with God.

Relational Healing

Many people use the labyrinth to pray about relationships that are broken. One woman in Yangon said she arrived at the MIT labyrinth infuriated about a situation that involved a visitor at her home. After walking the labyrinth she felt she had received a new perspective that was going to allow her to return to the house in a far better state of mind--which of course would have a positive effect the troubled relationship.

After walking the labyrinth some people spoke of receiving hope about friends and loved ones from whom they were estranged. Interestingly, upon reflection, it was evident that their hope came not from an assurance that the other person would change, but from the alteration of their own state of anxiety or willingness to change their behavior in a troubled relationship.

Social Healing

The labyrinth appears to be a safe place in which people feel free to explore their deep fears as well as their desires related to the communities in which they live. After a communal labyrinth experience at the Myanmar Institute of Theology, some people spoke of praying for their families, their churches, their country, and the whole world. One man explained that he had been able to lay his sense of societal despair down. A woman spoke of having hope for country she loved the first time ever. Others spoke of praying for those in prison, those still recovering from the devastating Nargis Cyclone and those in bondage to drug addiction. When asked by a friend, "Why did you take so long praying in the center of the labyrinth?" a young woman

from outside Yangon responded, “I was praying for the whole world, and that takes time!”

Other Types of Healing

The stories that have been shared illustrate the many ways in which praying with a labyrinth have resulted in a greater sense of wholeness and health. God seems to use the tool of labyrinth prayer to nurture a sense of connection that results in various types of healing. Many others types of healing, including mental (“This was the first time my mind has been free of distractions in the past three years.”) and inter-religious healing (“Without expecting it, I began to pray for my enemies.”) have been alluded to by those using the labyrinth at the Myanmar Institute of Theology.

Seeking Future Healing

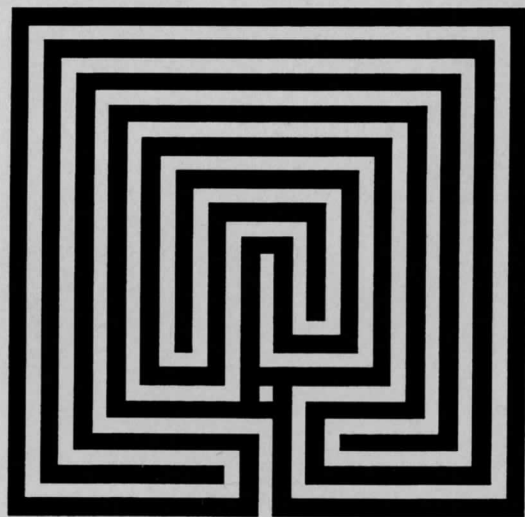
I encourage you to take the next step in your own journey to wholeness with The Sacred. Visit a labyrinth and pray for the healing for which you long-for yourself, for others, for the larger communities to which you belong, and for the world.

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The Rev. Jill K H Geoffrion, Ph.D., is the author of seven labyrinth-related books. She works with Faith, Hope and Love Global Ministries (www.fhlglobal.org) to introduce the labyrinth and offer labyrinth prayer experiences around the world. For more information about prayer labyrinths see www.jillgeoffrion.com.



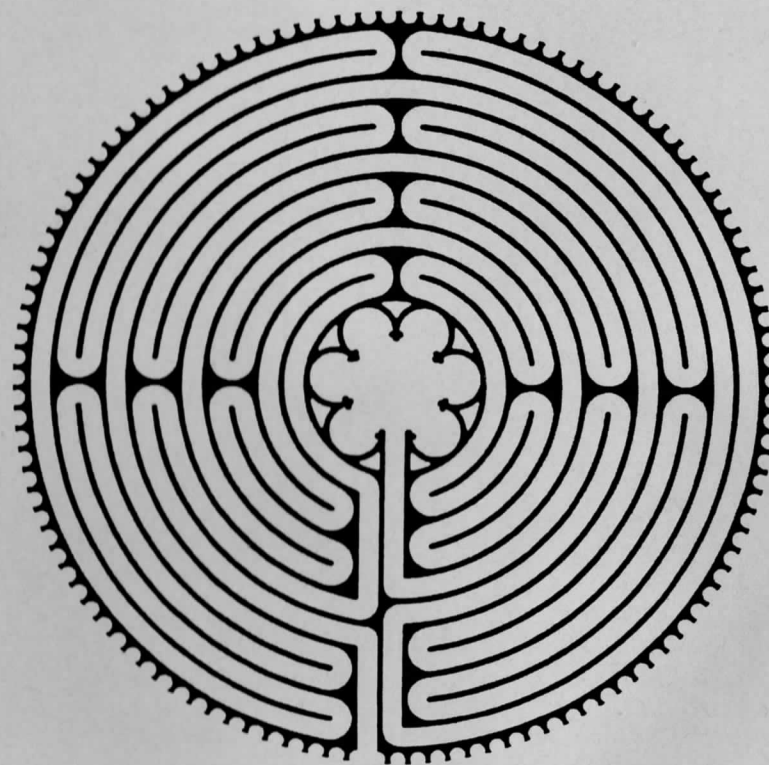
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