



# 'Seeking and finding the path of life' Warrensburg's prayer labyrinth

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**Who would have thought** something that looks like an easy place to get lost could help a church and community so fully find themselves?

Yet that's exactly what happened at

Warrensburg (Mo.) Church of the Brethren, which dedicated an expansive new prayer labyrinth in August. Located by a popular public walking and biking trail—appropriately named the Spirit Trail—it has already been a

source of inspiration for both church members and local residents.

"We've been looking for ways to be 'Jesus in the neighborhood,' and we feel this is definitely a way we can be," said Teresa Pearce, one of the committee

## About labyrinths

**Prayer labyrinths date to the early church**, with one found on a church floor from the fourth century A.D. They gained popularity in the Middle Ages; the most famous (and the model for Warrensburg's labyrinth) is found in Chartres Cathedral in France.

In recent decades, they have enjoyed a resurgence in the US and elsewhere. An article by Eastern University reported a conservative estimate of more than 5,000 labyrinths in the United States alone.

The University of Notre Dame's McGrath Institute for Church Life calls the experience "a form of walking meditation." "Where we pray affects how we pray," its labyrinth resource says. "Most of the time, we seek to pray in places of quiet and stillness. At other times, taking a walk or simply being outside helps us pray. Although we can embark on a walking meditation nearly anywhere, the predictable and concentrated route of a labyrinth frees us from the inevitable distractions that come with being out on a walk."

Similarly, an article by Zach Bott in the *Warrensburg Star Journal*—reporting on the construction of Warrensburg Church of the Brethren's labyrinth—said: "Unlike mazes where the goal is to be agile and swift in finding a way out, labyrinths lead the way to the center and are meant to be taken with slow, soft steps. The path is unobstructed, allowing the journey to be spiritual as you walk along each circuit of the labyrinth and reach the center."

To find a labyrinth near you, visit [labyrinthlocator.org](http://labyrinthlocator.org).

members (along with Melody Irle and Gloria Brown) who helped bring the idea to reality. She said one community leader noted, “You could have hidden the labyrinth back behind the church, but you chose to put it right out by the trail. That’s very welcoming. It really affirmed our hope for this to be a community effort.”

The spark for the project dates back more than two decades, when Warrensburg members Elizabeth Irle and her sister, Martha Louise Baile, attended a session at the 2001 Annual Conference in Baltimore and were invited to walk a prayer labyrinth. They returned to Missouri excited about the possibility, and Irle even mowed a temporary labyrinth in the lawn.

Other congregation members caught some of that excitement, and they created a fund to start collecting donations, putting some money aside from the budget each year. The project languished for some time until Warrensburg put in a memorial garden last year. That went well, and they had found a good contractor, so why not keep going?

They chose a design, made plans with the contractor, and ground was broken this past spring. By late summer the 50-foot-diameter labyrinth was complete, with a final price tag of about \$8,000—aided by a grant from Missouri/Arkansas District.

“It was a big project,” Pearce said. “We didn’t know how big it would be!”

A community dedication service took place on Aug. 11. Other members of the district were also able to experience it firsthand in September, when the district conference took place in Warrensburg.


In a newsletter article following the dedication, district executive Cindy Sanders said, “The service

before the dedication was used to educate and inform the people about labyrinths—what it is, why and how does one use it, when to use it, etc. The speaker even had us trace a labyrinth with our finger as she directed us into, through, and out of a labyrinth in spirit. It was useful information even for someone like me who has walked several labyrinths.”

Beyond its purpose for prayer and reflection, the labyrinth has borne some other fruit. Pearce said Warrensburg has already had visitors who were drawn to the congregation by the labyrinth. The Johnson County Spirit Trail Coalition, which maintains the adjacent trail, is publicizing the labyrinth on the organization’s website, while the congregation is helping to get the word out about the trail. The labyrinth’s construction even included the installation of five stone steps to make access from the trail easier.

Already, Pearce has heard a stream of positive comments: A woman who said, “I can’t believe how much this is encouraging me on my journey”; people who have walked it and said, “Oh, I feel so much lighter”; even a woman who couldn’t walk due to mobility issues but watched an event there and said, “The next day I felt so loving and open to everyone.” Others are curious and just want to know more.

Special events so far have included a moonlight labyrinth walk with luminaria and hosting a “Cowboy Church” group who had studied a book that included a chapter on labyrinths but never experienced one.

Of the latter group, Pearce said, “Their theology was very different from ours, but you could not have told it that entire time. It was a very unifying experience. I think that’s what the labyrinth is doing.” 

## A prayer for the path

This resource, written by Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm and included in the Church of the Brethren *Hymnal Supplement* (No. 1079), was used for the dedication service of Warrensburg’s labyrinth:

Christ has come.  
Before I take another step,  
turn a new corner,  
or choose which way to go,  
Help me to remember  
where I have been  
and where you have been with me.  
May I look back on the tracks I have made  
recognizing the places I have lost my way,  
learning and laughing.

Christ is come.  
As I make my way stepping and staggering  
and stopping,  
I am sometimes lost or misled—  
I am sometimes curious—  
And I am never alone.  
I can name you above all living creatures  
and I can recognize your face among neighbors.  
You are the surest guide through paths unknown.

Christ will come again.  
Where I am going, you alone know.  
May I have no other destination  
than to be nearer to you,  
more loving toward my neighbor,  
inspired by joy and gratitude,  
seeking and finding the path of life,  
in the presence of One who is the fullness of joy.



courtesy of Missouri/Arkansas District