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Corning, Elmira churches offer labyrinth walks

Versions of ancient paths to meditation

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An ancient tool that can aid meditation, contemplation and healing is being offered during Holy Week at churches in Corning and Elmira.

A labyrinth modeled after one at Chartres Cathedral in France can be walked from 6 to 8 p.m. today, 6 to 7 p.m. Thursday and 5 to 7 p.m. Good Friday in the recreation hall of First United Methodist Church, 144 Cedar St. in Corning.

Walk times on Thursday and Friday at the Corning church will be followed by brief worship services around the labyrinth. The recreation hall can be accessed through the Cedar Street entrance.

In Trinity Episcopal Church at 304 N. Main St., Elmira, a self-guided meditation on Mary's way to the cross will begin at 7 p.m. on Good Friday. The church can be entered at First Street, where parking is available.

Both labyrinths will feature special music and lighting. Prayers to recite, meditations and information will be available.

"For me, it's part of the whole notion of pilgrimage," the Rev. Rick Sivers, pastor of Corning First, said of the purpose of the labyrinth.

"Supposedly in the old medieval context, when you got to the center, you were closest to God. You had walked your way there in prayer," he said.

"It's not for everybody. Some people just don't get it, but it's the kind of thing that's nice to offer to people."

Friday's walk at Trinity will be about an hour long, said Gloria O'Sullivan, who was instrumental in resurrecting the labyrinth at the church last year.

"They can meditate as long as they want, as long as they're comfortable," she said. "Everyone walks at their own pace and does what their heart needs to do. We will do the Seven Sorrows of Mary around the inner circle with candles, and a meditation will be written there for anyone that wants to go that path."

The labyrinth in Corning was created on a 25-foot square of cloth as a confirmation class project while Sivers served at a United Methodist church in Minetto, N.Y. The congregation gave it to him, he said.

Trinity's labyrinth originally was laid out with masking tape for a weekend retreat in 1999 and was rarely used until it was more fully restored last year.

The response to the labyrinth at Trinity has been slow but sure, said the Rev. William Lutz, the church's rector.

"When you say 'labyrinth,' most people don't understand," he said. People tend to think of it as "that maze thing," and while it looks like a maze, it is much more than that, he said. "It's a divine imprint that's been used by all kinds of religious groups forever. It's not just Christians."

Labyrinths are ancient and have been found throughout the world, according to The Labyrinth Society, an international organization based in Trumansburg that supports the creation, maintenance and use of labyrinths.

Labyrinths were popular during the Middle Ages as a substitute for a pilgrimage to the Holy Land.

* More information: www.labyrinthociety.org.



The labyrinth at Trinity Episcopal Church in Elmira is prepared for walkers on Good Friday who can follow a self-guided meditation of Mary's way to the cross. (RAY FINGER / Staff Photo)