

Path of faith leads always to the centre

ARTICLE by Darlene Polachic (Saskatoon Star Phoenix, 2003-09-13)

When Arnie Thiessen drew up the landscape design for the Resurrection Lutheran Church grounds on Lenore Drive, his long-term plans included an outdoor prayer labyrinth.

"Having a labyrinth outdoors makes it accessible to the whole community," Thiessen says. "It is a way of the church reaching out to the neighbourhood."

The labyrinth project was slotted for "somewhere down the road," but through a set of unusual circumstances, it became a reality this summer.

Rev. Lee Woolery, Resurrection's minister, explains: "Every year a group of Lutheran high school students from Olympia, Washington goes on a mission trip, usually to work on a Habitat for Humanity project. This year they were late sending in their application, so they had to look for another destination."

MASTER PLAN

On the strength of a song they heard entitled 'Saskatchewan,' one of the young people said: 'Why not go there? In looking on a map, they realized Saskatchewan was a very large place, so one fellow closed his eyes and pointed his finger at the map. It landed on Saskatoon. 'This is where we'll go,' he declared. A phone call to the Lutheran seminary here connected them with Resurrection Church.

"We were given the responsibility of coming up with something for these 14 young people to do for a week," says Woolery. "But God opened doors and led us through. We did things we didn't think were possible. The students were blessed" too. I'm still getting e-mails saying how much their lives were changed by coming here.

"We got them involved in a downtown ministry led by community chaplain Ed Hilchy, who has an office/drop-in centre on 20th Street, as well as at the White Buffalo Lodge, and the Friendship Inn. They also went to Camp Kinasao at Christopher Lake and laid some sod.

"Prior to the students' coming, Woolery had mentioned Resurrection was hoping to build a labyrinth, but was not in a financial position to do so. Intrigued by the project, the young people appealed to their home churches, which donated the necessary funds. In preparation, Thiessen, who is a professional landscape architect with

Crosby, Hanna & Associates, had a bobcat level the ground adjacent to the church and cut pathways to the street. The labyrinth surface was covered with crusher dust and paving stones were purchased in readiness for the students.

The design he chose is based on the labyrinth inside Chartres Cathedral in France. "We chose that one because it is a traditional Christian design rather than a pagan one."

The young people worked on the labyrinth from Monday morning to Tuesday night, bordering the pathways with paving stones for permanency and neatness. A group from the church added the finishing touches. Eventually, Thiessen says, trees, shrubs, and a bench or two will be added.

Woolery explains a labyrinth as a pathway that twists and turns, but leads you to the centre. "When you first look at it, it seems like a maze, but it isn't. A maze has twists and turns that don't take you where you want to go. A labyrinth has one way in and one way out. The journey replicates the journey of faith which is not a straight path, but because of the single pattern, you don't have to worry along the way. The centre is symbolic of being centred in Christ. You know the path will lead you to the centre."

He says people walk the labyrinth for many reasons: prayerful meditation, spiritual awakening, a way to come to terms with problems like grief, conflict, or personal tragedy.

"It can be a place of celebration, too, where one walks at significant times like birthdays, anniversaries, or the birth of a child or grandchild."

To walk the Resurrection labyrinth is to take a journey of about half a kilometre. "Many will pray while they walk," Woolery suggests. "Prayer doesn't have to be done kneeling or standing still with hands folded. This is an opportunity to dialogue with God. Some may come with a Bible and meditate on a particular Scripture passage while they walk. Or it may be a time of silence, a time to get away from everyday pressures, a time to do more listening than talking. A person might choose to spend more time in the centre praying. When they walk back out to where they started, hopefully they will feel changed and refreshed in their spirit."

Thiessen says it is traditional to enter a labyrinth from the east or the south. "Our entry is from the south, which is the street side. We planned this deliberately because we wanted the path of our labyrinth to lead to the street and the community rather than the church.

"We hope the community will feel free to use it and understand that this labyrinth is not exclusively for our church but for them, as well."