

A meditative journey into the new year: People walk labyrinth at First Presbyterian Church

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Published: January 1, 2014, 7:34 PM



Clark County residents start 2014 with a labyrinth walk at Vancouver's First Presbyterian Church.

(http://columbian.media.clients.ellingtoncms.com/img/photos/2014/01/20140119/437199/437199th_42269.jpg)

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Diane Weber approached the exit of the labyrinth, marked with a small rug and two candles. She paused, put her hands together, then stepped into 2014.



"It's very centering," Weber, a Vancouver resident, said of the experience. "I feel like my year starts off on the right foot."

Walking a labyrinth has become a New Year's Day ritual for Weber in recent years. She joined others in silently taking a meditative walk Wednesday through a single winding path, laid out on a large canvas inside Vancouver's First Presbyterian Church. Unlike a maze, there are no dead-ends.

The church has hosted the event for several years with Eunice Schroeder of Sacred Journey Ministries. Many visitors, including Weber, have come before. Others were stepping into a labyrinth for the first time.

Each came away with his or her own experience, often difficult to put into words.

For most, the journey represents something new every time, Schroeder said.

"We're different every time we walk," Schroeder said. "It's about what's going on inside of us."

Wednesday's participants proceeded at varying speeds. Many stopped at times. Some kept their arms folded; others held their hands out as they walked. Only the sound of soft music and shoeless feet gently shuffling on canvas settled over the room.

The ancient rite of walking a labyrinth can be a deeply spiritual, reflective process, said Schroeder, who lives in the Vancouver area. It can be a chance to spend time in prayer. On an open guest book at Wednesday's walk, one person simply wrote, "release."

Anjanette Petty-Kountz was among those walking a labyrinth for the first time Wednesday. She proceeded slowly at first, she said, as she focused on letting go of anxieties and burdens of the past year. After reaching the center, Petty-Kountz's mindset shifted to excitement for the coming year. She walked faster.

"By the time I got out, I just felt rejuvenated," said Petty-Kountz, who came with Weber and Karen Johnson of Vancouver.

For Pam Otton and her daughter Linda, both members of First Presbyterian Church, the labyrinth is an annual tradition. The two called it a way to relieve stress, and spend time with each other and with God.

Schroeder has made labyrinth walks a central part of her ministry -- and her own personal journey.

"When you're walking that winding path, it's like life," Schroeder said. "It's not a straight line."



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