

# Praying the Labyrinth in the Republic of Congo

Jill Geoffrion

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Goma, a border city of the Democratic Republic of Congo, was a city in need of a labyrinth. The lingering effects of the civil war from 1998-2003, the ongoing problems of "security" caused by warring militias, the refugee camps for internally displaced persons with all the misery they hold, the lack of governmental infrastructure or help, soaring inflation, widespread poverty, hunger, these problems affect nearly every resident in overwhelming ways.

At the invitation of the Archbishop of the Anglican Church in Congo and the international humanitarian non-profit HEAL Africa, my husband Tim and I arrived in Goma last September to share in a week-long training event for pastors. The local chaplain assured me that there would be a place to install a labyrinth.

When we walked around the area together, I asked about the possibility of using a parking area so that I could install the Chartres-style labyrinth next to a dormitory where over one hundred women were waiting for surgeries to repair the physical damage from violent rapes which are part of the war-tactics of local militia groups.

The next morning I arrived and began laying out the pattern. As soon as I began, people, both adults and children, came offering to help. By lunchtime the pattern was laid out on the ground and by mid-afternoon chunks of lava from a volcanic eruption in 2002 covered much of the plastic tape we had used to separate the paths.

All day long, medical staff from a nearby hospital, social workers involved in community projects, women waiting for medical care, construction workers, children, and visitors came by to see what was happening. "What is this?" "What does it signify?" "Oh, it's beautiful!" (my favorite) "Is it a spider's web?" I tried to greet as many people as I could. When asked, I would explain, "It's a pathway of prayer. Come back when it's finished, and pray it!"

In the afternoon, people began using it. Women with babies on their backs walked to the center. Children, many of whom are HIV positive and were in the area to receive their antiretroviral medications ran in and out.

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The first time they saw the finished labyrinth, during a break, some of the pastors decided to try it. I worried that without an introduction they might not understand what an amazing spiritual tool this labyrinth could be. I need not have been concerned. When they were done, these pastors began telling others about their positive spiritual experiences.

A construction foreman walked the labyrinth after work. The next morning he wanted to tell me, "When I prayed the labyrinth, I realized that even though there are many challenges, and different things happen, the important thing in the spiritual life is to keep going. Perseverance is necessary." He felt strong to face the challenges in his life. He wanted to know if I could give him a copy of the design so that he could build a permanent labyrinth that would inspire churches, schools, and others to build other prayer labyrinths.

Some of the medical staff from the nearby HEAL Africa hospital walked the labyrinth on their way to and from work. A man in scrubs told me, "As I walked, I saw the way was long and very difficult. Then I realized that what needed to change was my attitude. The way was long, but I had the possibility of choosing what I thought about it." One of the HEAL Africa interns who was teaching research methodology to the hospital staff reflected on her labyrinth walk, "It was very peaceful. It gave me the space to consider things I haven't really had time to think about. While on the labyrinth I also became aware of many things that I want to pray about."

Women waiting for fistula (abnormal openings between organs) repair surgeries watched everything from the cooking area beside the labyrinth. After a walk, one woman wanted me to know, "This is the path of my life. I am walking to God."



Once, several pastors who were out by the labyrinth drawing a sketch of it asked, "How do you make this?" I began to show them. As I outlined the seed pattern and steps to follow, more and more people gathered around. That's when I realized I needed to teach everyone how to draw (and hopefully build) a labyrinth. We quickly added a labyrinth construction session to the seminar.

At the end of the week, some expressed surprise at how meaningful prayer had been on the labyrinth. One man shared, "When I first saw the labyrinth, I wondered, 'What is this strange thing?' Now, I want build a labyrinth in the garden of our church." Less than a week after the seminar, a different pastor emailed with joy, saying he had already built a labyrinth, and introduced 18 parishioners to praying it. He later sent a photo of a group of AIDS orphans walking a three-circuit labyrinth he had built near their school.

Building this labyrinth and sharing it with others was one of the great joys of my life. I am still marveling at the wonderful ways in which God used this labyrinth to comfort, inspire, connect, encourage, and challenge those who used it. I am deeply grateful.

After a particularly meaningful labyrinth walk, one man told me, "The spiritual life is a long trajectory. On this journey we often encounter difficulties that discourage us. And often we go around in circles. But when we have courage, we arrive at our destination. God is with us on this walk, and we will finish by arriving in the center."

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# LABYRINTH PATHWAYS

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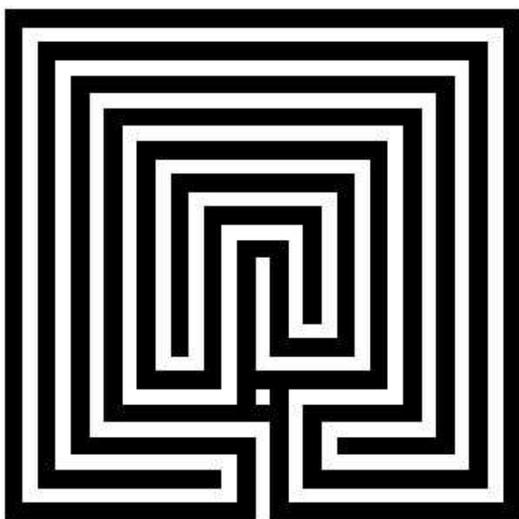
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