

A Labyrinth for Christ Church

The Vision is Born

In 2007 Episcopal Relief and Development reached out to Christ Church, Blacksburg, in the wake of the tragic events of April 16th. In a first-ever grant given to a “disaster site” that didn’t need food, clothing or shelter, the purpose of the grant was to help Christ Church and, through us the entire Blacksburg community, along the road to healing. Christ Church teamed up with community organizations, such as HERE, and sponsored a weekend conference that featured a screening of the film “The Power of Forgiveness.” The Rev. Lyndon Harris came to Christ Church that Sunday for worship and discussion. He represented a larger project called “Gardens of Forgiveness.” In the months after his visit, interest began to grow in creating a space at Christ Church to offer a contemplative retreat for prayer and healing, one that would not just benefit our parish, but the entire community and diocese.

A committee was formed to study the possibilities around constructing such a space. Chaired by Lisa Hammett, the committee also included Tom Brown, Donna Dunay, Elizabeth Foster, Helene Goetz, Margaret Hasselmann, Scott Russell and Matt Vollmer. After prayerful consideration, collaborative research and study, the committee decided to propose the building of a Labyrinth on the grounds of Christ Church. Labyrinths have been used for meditation since ancient times. A Labyrinth consists of a paved or worn path that leads the person walking it, sometimes called a pilgrim, along a winding journey to a center point and then back out again. It is not a maze. The pilgrim cannot get lost in the Labyrinth.

The original plan proposed building the Labyrinth along with a garden in the side yard at corner of Church and Roanoke. The more plans took shape, however, it was clear that this proposed project would far exceed the grant monies available. As the committee strongly believed that the spirit of the grant meant that the project must be completely paid for by the grant and that NO church resources would be sought in the completion of the final product. Ben Johnson was asked to review the plan toward aiding in its implementation.

The committee then turned to Ben Johnson for advice. Ben designed and built the memorial garden on the church grounds in the early 2000’s. Ben proposed building the labyrinth in the courtyard between the sanctuary and the parish library. After much study and deliberation, the new design was approved by committee members as well as others, the Rector, both Wardens and Jack Davis among them. The revised project was presented to the vestry on February 10, 2009.

The vestry reviewed and discussed in a spirited manner the design, budget, and interest in the proposal. The consensus was supportive and positive and suggested that the design be presented to the larger congregation to gain their comment.

The vestry will act on the proposal at the March 10th meeting. When approved, construction will take place this spring, with completion expected in late April. We are eager to move forward so that we do not lose this gracious grant.

Building the Labyrinth

The design is quite simple, as you will see in the attached drawings. It supports the historic context of the church while significantly bringing the space up-to-date. The central focus for the courtyard is the stone inlaid labyrinth in light and dark grey precast tumbled concrete units, forming a 21' circle. The terrace will be expanded to provide level access between the sanctuary and the commons. The surrounding landscaping will be enhanced with the addition of three trees, 20 boxwoods and the continued use of seasonal flowers and ground covers. All existing plants and flowers considered healthy and usable will be carefully removed from the present site, stored and replanted in the new area. The Peace Poll will be stay in-place as well.

As is often the case, some of the real benefit of this project will be just below the surface. What you won't see will be a new drainage system for removing excessive rain water away from the space, a stable foundation for the stone terrace, and conduit for a new low voltage lighting system for the space. All of these features will help make this an attractive and inviting place to pray, meditate or just enjoy God's creation. The space will also be functional, offering a location for outside services, hospitality, and other events. Future plans include three farm raised teak benches, much like those in the Memorial Garden, where visitors may sit and enjoy the new environment. The lighting will help ensure the safety of the space at night, while providing 24/7 access to those who may be seeking a place for quiet retreat.

Engaging the Community

We are excited that this gift to Christ Church is one which can invite others to share. In order to see the Labyrinth realized, we will need involvement from people all over the community and the diocese. There will be a series of work days during the construction, and there will be a task for everyone who wants to help at some point in the project.

You may have to "pardon our dust" a bit during the construction, but once it is completed, the Labyrinth at Christ Church will be a gift not only to ourselves, but to the community around us.

Be watching for ways to come out and support the project. Volunteer your time and energy to help make it a reality. Please call Ben Johnson (230-6224), the clergy or members of the vestry for more information.