

# Mindfulness Practice and the Labyrinth Experience in a University Setting . . .

by Tina Christensen

Judy Redman is a Uniting Church minister who coordinates the chaplaincy teams for the Albury-Wodonga campuses of both Charles Sturt and La Trobe Universities.



She first encountered labyrinths at a National Youth Convention and a denominational University Students' retreat, but didn't think much more at the time. Only later attending a gathering called the Wisdom's Feast, where she experienced a facilitated walk did she connect with the labyrinth.

Judy was inspired to bring the labyrinth to the universities after listening to one of the campus counsellors describing a mindfulness exercise. He would get people to walk around a room as slowly as possible. "I made the connection between that process and what the labyrinth could offer." Mindfulness experiences are being used extensively in counselling at the moment and so Judy thought a labyrinth might be a good addition to campus life and support the work done by the counsellors.

She also appreciates mindfulness practise as a spiritual discipline. "It's employed by many different faith traditions and a labyrinth therefore, introduced as a mindfulness practice can work well in a multi-faith context."

It wasn't long between attending the Wisdom's Feast and introducing the labyrinth to the campus' because she focused on temporary labyrinths. "It didn't take very long at all. The counsellor at Charles Sturt and I drew a 7 ring classical design labyrinth in chalk outside the Learning Commons (aka library) and shortly after that I used flour to mark out one on the grass at La Trobe.

Flour only lasts a few days even if it doesn't rain, so we looked for something more permanent and for the next one I did on grass, I borrowed the line marker from the soccer club that uses our sports field. It is big and has four wheels and is designed to mark straight lines, so was very hard work.

We then applied for some funding from the staff well-being fund to buy a more suitable marker - a little one with only two wheels that is much easier to push. The outline lasts several weeks, especially in Winter when the grass doesn't grow so fast."

"Every so often we get students who 'run' the labyrinth. I always wonder how they don't get giddy, but they seem to enjoy themselves. I had fun walking one by the light of a number of mobile phones during an evening event. I mentioned it to several students and they wanted to try it then and there!"

Judy could not say specifically who walks as her office is a long way from where the labyrinths are sited, however people whose offices overlook the sites have told her "they see people using them regularly."

Currently there are no organised walks. New students find out about their existence through posters, emails, Facebook posts that Judy does and an 'old school' sandwich board sited near the location. Brochures explaining 'what it is' and 'how to' use it are left in waterproof plastic boxes near the entry to each labyrinth.

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The value of labyrinth walking is being embraced more and more. This year for example, the School of Community Health included a labyrinth activity in their orientation program.



“It is difficult to tell how much they have altered stress levels or the enjoyment of the outdoors. People certainly use them whenever I make them available. And enthusiasm comes from the least expected places sometimes. For example, the man who mows the lawns at La Trobe and the person in charge of facilities at Charles Sturt are both firm advocates.

Judy has been successful getting funding for a suitable sports field marker and spray paint. “The labyrinth we have at Charles Sturt is now semi-permanent, in that it is painted on a gravel surface and only needs re-coating every 2-3 months. The paint to do this costs around \$30-40. It is an 11 ring classical pattern, because this is easier to draw than a Chartres, although I prefer to walk a Chartres.”

Weather permitting, Judy enjoys walking several times a week herself. Going forward, she would like to offer some guided walks, however she doesn't feel she has the expertise. This is apart from lack of time and a university timetable to accommodate! She values the fact that introducing this new element has expanded peoples perception of what chaplaincy is (not just bible study) and enabled her to connect with students and faculty who don't see themselves as conventionally religious.

It seems the journey with labyrinths for Judy and her universities has been a delight. When asked, would she do it all again, her response is “Yes, it has definitely been worth it. I am working towards making them available on a more permanent basis.” Lucky students and staff at Latrobe and Sturt universities!

### What people said . . .

One of her favourite labyrinth encounter stories concerns a student, on his way to buy an energy drink. The young man stopped to see what she was doing. He walked and then told Judy how the labyrinth walk had energised him so he no longer needed to buy a drink.

Another time there was a member of staff who stood for a very long time in the middle. When she came out, she asked for instructions on how to draw one in her carport at home so she could walk regularly. She'd had an incredible sense of 'release'.

And yet another story relays how turning our focus 'in' on the labyrinth can shift perception; a staff member at La Trobe was stunned that despite there always being traffic noise from the nearby freeway, once she stepped into the labyrinth, she no longer heard it. What she did hear were birds and other sounds of nature. The traffic sounds returned only when she stepped out again.