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The new \$450,000 labyrinth at Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, based on an ancient design and financed by Charlotte Mailliard Swig and others as a memorial to Mel Swig

Grace's Labyrinth Shows the Way

BY JESSE HAMLIN
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Perhaps only in a city with San Francisco's ecumenical spirit would an Episcopal cathedral install a Christian labyrinth in memory of a Jewish philanthropist.

Tomorrow, after the morning service ends at 12:15, Grace Cathedral will christen its permanent outdoor labyrinth, a 40-foot-wide symbolic circle whose winding paths and rosette-shaped center are patterned on the stone labyrinth laid in the floor of France's Chartres Cathedral by Benedictine

monks 800 years ago.

It's a memorial to the late San Francisco civic leader Mel Swig, a Temple Emanu-El congregant who was also a longtime trustee of both Grace and the Jesuit-run University of San Francisco, where his family funded the first Jewish studies program ever established at a Catholic school.

The labyrinth — 11 14-inch-wide concentric circles in four quadrants, made of contrasting shades of gray terrazzo — is intended as a path of meditation for spiritual seekers of all faiths.

Walking in circles toward the inevitable center "quiets the mind, invites a

deeper part of our being to come forward," said the Rev. Lauren Artress, the Grace canon who has become, in her words, the Johnny Appleseed of the burgeoning labyrinth movement.

Hitting the road with the portable canvas labyrinth she first placed inside Grace Cathedral in 1991, Artress has visited churches and spiritual centers around the world, turning people on to the mystical tradition of the labyrinth.

Grace has sold about 80 of the labyrinth "sets" kits it packages for \$135; it gives groups the "sacred" geometry for the labyrinth's proportions and suggestions on how to make one.

"It's a universal experience that's open to everyone," Artress said, "whether you're Christian, Buddhist, Hindu, Jewish, Muslim. It doesn't matter. It's an incredible spiritual tool."

Walking the labyrinth, which is about one-third of a mile, "calms us," Artress said, "gets us in touch with our breathing, brings us into ourselves. That's what people are longing for."

The new \$450,000 labyrinth, which will be celebrated tomorrow with the ringing of Grace's carillon, speeches and a ribbon-cutting, was designed by William Turnbull Associates, the San Francisco architectural firm building

the new chapter house and other additions at Grace. It's being paid for by Mel Swig's widow, Charlotte Mailliard Swig, and his family and friends.

"There couldn't be a more appropriate tribute to Mel," she said. "He cared passionately about all mankind. Grace has always had its door open to everyone. It stands for all the things Mel was for."

Located in the plaza at the right of the main Taylor Street entrance, the labyrinth will be open 24 hours a day.

The purple and gray wool labyrinth
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LABYRINTH: Spiritual Symbol

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featured in the nave of the cathedral since last year — more than 70,000 people have walked on Grace's indoor labyrinths since '91 — will still be open to visitors from 7 a.m. to 6 p.m. daily. But unlike the new outdoor circle, you have to remove your shoes to walk on it.

The archetypal image has cropped up in various forms in many cultures and religions over the past 4,000 years, from the Celts to the Hopis, in Tibetan Buddhism and Jewish mysticism.

The Christian labyrinth design began appearing in European churches around the eighth century. The rose-petal center symbolizes the Virgin Mary; the six petals, the six days of creation.

"It's a mystery where these sacred patterns come from," said Artress, who walked her first labyrinth in 1985 at a seminar taught by psychologist and "planetary citizen" Jean Houston.

In 1991, Artress and a small

group from Grace went to Chartres to see its legendary labyrinth. It was covered with chairs. Unable to speak with cathedral officials, who had ignored Artress' written requests for a meeting — "I guess a woman Episcopal priest wasn't high on their list," she said — Artress' group moved the chairs themselves and walked the path.

"It was a glorious feeling," Artress said, "like sunshine coming through the cathedral, which was moody, morose and not well kept-up. The whole climate changed. There was a light, warm feeling."

Artress believes Grace's is the first permanent Chartres-style labyrinth built in 600 years. But it's not the first new one to crop up around here.

"We beat 'em," said Father Robert Bryant of the Episcopal Church of our Saviour in Mill Valley. His church built a smaller ceramic-tile labyrinth this spring, patterned after the one at the French cathedral at Bayeau.