

The Christian Life

(Written by Rev. Michael Precht)
Before we were called “Christians,” the people who dedicated their lives to Jesus were known as “Followers of the Way” (Acts 9:2). That old name reminds us that faith is an ongoing act of trust and growth.

We like to imagine the Way by using an ancient image of the Christian’s faith journey: the labyrinth. The oldest known Christian labyrinth was built around 324 AD, and it is still visible in a church in Al-Asnam, Algeria. That labyrinth is 8 feet wide - with paths too small for walking - and early pilgrims may have followed it with their eyes or traced it with a finger. The most famous labyrinth was laid into the floor of Chartres Cathedral around 1200 AD.



There are many different guides and aids to prayer, but for centuries, Christians have found labyrinths to be helpful for maintaining their focus on God.

The labyrinth has three characteristics that make it a tried and true metaphor for walking with Jesus:

1. The labyrinth is open. A labyrinth is not a maze - there are no dead ends, tricks, or secret paths. The only way to get lost or turned around is to look too far ahead. Catherine of Siena once said that “all the way to heaven is heaven,” and 2 Corinthians 5:7 says that we are to “walk by faith, not by sight.” The labyrinth reminds us that anyone can know Jesus by simply taking the next step and then the next one, believing that such simple faith will draw us deeper into God’s love.

2. The labyrinth has thin places. As you walk or trace a labyrinth, there will be times when you are close to the center. Sometimes, you will be so close that it is as if you have already arrived. At other times, you may be farther from the center, but your path is always bringing you forward. This reminds us that we may be drawing closer to God even when God feels distant. It also reminds us that God draws us near, even when we still have a long road to travel.

3. Everyone is in it together: If the Way was a straight line, those who have been walking it a long time would be far removed from those who are just beginning. The twists and turns of the labyrinth bring all disciples alongside each other to encourage one another.

The key is to move steadily and slowly. Don’t rush it. While moving toward the center, pilgrims would pray over anything — bitterness, pride, habits, expectations — that they needed to surrender in order to live more fully open to God. The center of the labyrinth represents the heart of God, where we rest in wonder, love, and praise as God’s will is done in us as it is in heaven. Upon reaching the center, pilgrims would wait until they received a word — a remembered scripture, a mental image, or a feeling of consolation — from God. Then, pilgrims would retrace their movement, praying as they returned outward.

The labyrinth is a wonderful image of our discipleship. Our lives are shaped by five practices and promises that draw us near to God and each other: prayers, presence, gifts, service, and witness. We map these five “disciplines” onto the labyrinth, with our witness at the heart of everything we do. Consider all the ways you might draw nearer to God, remember that you are not walking alone. Jesus is at the center of it all, nearer than we hoped, and as we draw near to Him we draw nearer to one another as well.

WHERE WE ARE GOING

These three vows have been used by Christians for 2,000 years and have been the fundamental commitments of all Christians, everywhere, at all times. These vows remind us of our ultimate goal to follow Christ in everything.

1. Do you renounce the spiritual forces of wickedness, reject the evil powers of this world, and repent of your sin?

This is our promise about what we are turning from. To “repent” is to turn and go in a new direction. To be a Christian is to say, “I will not pursue any goals or paths for my life that will not endure in the Kingdom of God.” We may not always live up to our new purpose, but we are not going back to our old ones. (Matthew 4:17)

2. Do you accept the freedom and power God gives you to resist evil, injustice, and oppression in whatever forms they present themselves?

This is our promise about what we are turning away. God does not simply invite us to turn from personal sin in our own lives; God enlists us in the work of actively resisting evil all around us. Because every human being bears the image of God, we tend the wounds, defend the dignity, and give witness to the needs of those whom the world has neglected or despised. (Luke 4:18-19)

3. Do you confess Jesus Christ as your Savior, put your whole trust in His grace, and promise to serve him as your Lord, in union with the church which Christ has opened to people of all ages, nations and races?

This is our promise about Who we are turning towards. After all, we want to be known by what we are for more than we are known by what we are against. We are for Jesus Christ, who saves us from our sin, who saves us from the evil that is done to us, and who saves us for an everlasting relationship that cannot be conquered, even by death. This is the good news that we are here to announce: that Jesus is Lord and his eternal Kingdom is greater than all the temporary powers, rulers, and nations of this world (Romans 12:9).

ON THE WAY

This vow is particular to our local church and other United Methodist churches. The first three vows are about *Who* we follow: this vow is about *how* we help one another along the way.

4. As members of this congregation, will you faithfully participate in its ministries by your prayers, your presence, your gifts, your service, and your witness?

These disciplines of prayer, presence, gifts, service, and witness are “means of grace” - through them, we discover God’s transforming power. We do not do these things to try and earn our relationship with God. Even before we turn to God, God pursues us with a love beyond all deserving. Instead of practicing these disciplines to prove how good we are, we believe these habits help us discover how good God is. Jesus has promised to meet us when

we pray in hidden moments (Matthew 6:5-13), when we gather in His name (Matthew 18:20), when we share generously from our resources (Matthew 6:19-21), when we serve others (Matthew 25:34-40) and when we tell the story of how we have come to know Him (Luke 12:5-12). Each step we take in The Way of Jesus is an invitation to know Him more deeply until we are lost in wonder, love, and praise.