

# *Walking with God in a very special garden*



Patricia Watson is an ACT Director. She was called to teaching later in life and has been teaching in primary schools since 1996. She brought with her a wealth of experience gained from being a civil servant for 17 years, an Ofsted lay inspector and owning and managing a successful business.

Patricia worships at St Luke's Parish Church in Hartlepool and was previously a member of the PCC, Parish Treasurer, Deanery and Diocesan representative. She enjoys Arabic dancing and occasionally appears on stage as a solo artist.

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## **Coping with complexity**

Being a teacher is such a complex job! Day by day we find ourselves being much more than educators. We are also social workers, legal whiz kids (to understand and overcome the legislation which binds us), facilitators, mentors, etc, etc. The list is endless.

I don't know about you but I often wonder how teachers manage without a faith. It is only through prayer – my own prayers and the prayers of fellow Christians – that I'm sure I survive the day to day complexities of my calling! Like all of you, I pray for support on my personal spiritual journey. I also attend Christian events and surf the internet to help me survive and develop, both as a Christian and as a teacher.

I would like to share with you a recent experience which had a profound affect on me and has helped me to re-evaluate my role and my future.

## **The garden**

I was invited to attend the grand opening of the Labyrinth by one of the Elders of St Columba's United Reform Church on Saturday 11 June 2005. The church is situated at the corner of Marsh House Avenue and Knole Road in a rather run-down part of Billingham. I didn't know what to expect as I passed nearby houses that were boarded-up and covered with graffiti.

The Pastor, Revd Daniel Meister, is responsible for transforming the church garden. A display of 'before' and 'after' photos in the church hall shows how an ugly, derelict space became a beautiful garden 'Labyrinth'. This haven of peace and quiet includes various works of art designed to take the

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willing pilgrim on a spiritual journey; each part of the garden helps the mind to focus and reflect.

As it was the grand opening I spent only a few minutes viewing each piece of artwork as I was aware of other pilgrims but in future there will be a maximum of four people in the Labyrinth at any one time. (This is because there will be four personal tours in the form of personal CD Roms with recorded details to provide more insight into the art work. Each item will be accompanied by passages from the Bible which will assist the pilgrim to meditate on and engage with the artwork.)

### The presence of Jesus

According to the Labyrinth's designer the garden combines 'spiritual dimensions found in creation and elements of art and modern technology.' The garden contains 11 friezes. Each has a title which reflects a particular aspect of our spiritual journey. For example Frieze 1 (the starting point) is named 'Inward Journey' whilst Frieze 11 (the final frieze) is called 'Impressions'. (My personal response to Frieze 11 was to want to rename it 'Reflections' as it invited me to reflect upon the times the Lord carries me.)

Vibrant colours and thought-provoking artwork carry the pilgrim on their journey. Of course, our journey never finishes. There is a 12th experience, more powerful than any of the works of art, and that is the presence of Jesus.

The Labyrinth leaflet says:

'There are three windows in this garden, each with three separate compartments. There are three statues representing the Standing Stones of the Celts – symbolic connecting points between heaven and earth. There are three circles in this garden. Rose Bush, Holy Space Sunburst and Box Hedge Scroll as patterned on the 'Chi Rho' page from the *Book of Kells* (located by the kitchen door). The gold coloured stones that mark the path are flint. Flint was an important resource for ancient cultures, such as the Celts, being the spark that could create fire. What needs firing up in your

### Frieze 1 – Inward Journey (Saint Columba)

St Columba or Columcille (The Dove of the Church – as he was known) was born in Donegal, Ireland in 521. He died at Iona in 597. He was responsible for spreading Christianity to Scotland. He was a man familiar with journeys. Around the age of 42, he sailed from Ireland to Iona (on the west coast of Scotland) and there established a monastery that was eventually responsible for the creation of Lindisfarne (Holy Island) through St Aidan – which, of course, spread Christianity throughout Northern England and beyond. Columba's example of leaving his homeland of Ireland (never to return) became known among Celtic Christians as 'White Martyrdom'. This martyrdom was considered to be even more painful than red martyrdom (ie shedding one's blood for Christ) because it meant separating themselves from all that they loved for the sake of God. Columba and his followers founded dozens of monasteries all over Ireland and Scotland. They also had a keen interest in artistic expression – the famous *Book of Kells* is both art and Scripture. In the *Book of Kells* (which artist Andy King reproduced the cover of in Frieze 1) no one symbol is duplicated elsewhere in the book.



### Frieze 2 – Noise

Sound engineers speak of signals and noise. Signals are the meaningful parts of the transmission and noise is all the unwanted distractions. Life is full of noise and messages that interfere. In our information-rich society, it is easy to become overwhelmed with noise and miss the meaningful signal. What noises are on the inside of each of us? Thoughts that won't stop chattering; worries; anger; distractions! Listen to them. Place them to one side. Turn the noise off. Let God still your soul and give you peace. This particular frieze is a powerful expression of noise that has soothing colours that invite us to experience God's peace. Frieze 2 was designed by a pupil at Grangefield School.

### Frieze 3 – Letting Go

This frieze shows a Celtic village scene with Iona's heather-clad hills in the background; a Mother lets go of her child for the first time. This image is all about helping us to let go as we journey toward the centre of the Labyrinth. Take some slow, deep breaths; begin to let go of the tensions in your body. Feel the pressure of your busyness begin to slip away. You are an integral part of God's mysterious and wonderful creation. In front of you are a pile of stones and a pool of water. Celtic Christians believed in the power of water for its healing and life-giving properties. Jesus said that if we drink from Him, we would never be thirsty (John 4). Take a stone (representing your concerns and worries, name them), hold it tightly and then in your own time, let it go – imagine your concerns and worries falling into God's lap. How does it feel to release them?



life? The green coloured shale stone is identified with the green-coloured seas that the Celtic Christians crossed to reach destinations with the Gospel. Throughout the Garden you will see the colours of red, white and green typifying the three types of martyrdom important to Celtic Christians: red (dying for Christ), green (deep communion with nature and creation), white (self-imposed exile from one's homeland).'

By the time I'd reached Frieze 10 and Frieze 11, my emotional involvement was so intense I had tears in my eyes. It took less than five minutes sitting and reflecting under Frieze 11 for me to feel engulfed in the warmth of God's presence. I left feeling energised, refreshed and renewed. My deepest regret was that there weren't any postcards or books containing pictures of the art works and I hadn't taken a camera to photograph the art work to use for future prayer and meditation.

### Returning to the garden

Here is a Church trying to make a difference in challenging circumstances by providing something beautiful and unique for the whole community. I returned to school the following Monday feeling that God maybe wants me to consider moving out of my comfort zone and doing the same.

I returned to the Labyrinth during the summer with my camera! The first thing I noticed when I returned was that the church walls were still graffiti free and nothing seemed damaged. Given the area, this was surely a sign of God's presence and protection.

My Elder friend, Carol, and I were the first to use the personal CD Rom players and experience the spiritual journey in peace and quiet. I have no hesitation in recommending that everyone should visit the Labyrinth.

■ Patricia Watson

To find out more about the Labyrinth, please contact Revd Daniel Meister:  
T: 01642 804206

W: [www.Labyrinth.org.uk](http://www.Labyrinth.org.uk)

### Frieze 6 – Holy Space

This is holy space. God is here. You are welcome. This is your space to be with God and God's space to be with you. Make yourself at home. Be yourself. Be real. There's no rush. Let God love you. Let God know you. Let God heal you. Let God speak to you. Receive from God; commune with God. Feed on God. This space has on the ground a paved sunburst pattern. It allows you to remember the Light of Christ as the Son of God. There are 52 segments to this sun: one segment for each week of the year. Circles were important symbols to Celtic Christians. They are found in their artwork, in their written texts, their poetry and even the 'round-houses' of wattle and pitch they lived in. The circle emphasizes God's ability to circle us and to be in our middle. Celtic crosses, such as depicted in Andy King's frieze, and seen throughout the North of England. They represent God's incarnation and presence in the world and creation. Can you sense God's presence in this holy space?



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### Frieze 10 – Others

This frieze was created by students. It combines several motifs that are meant to emphasize the importance of others in our lives. Often when we reflect upon our families, we name our members upon a family tree. Trees were important symbols to Celtic Christians who identified trees with life (for Celtic Christians were not unaccustomed to worshipping outdoors – in the middle of a wood; a beach; on a hillside). This tree contains symbols of importance that relate to Celtic Christianity. Which one(s) do you like and why? This family tree of life has roots made from hands – the hands of all those who we know and are connected with. Surrounding the frieze are flags of nations that emphasize sensitivity and respect for other peoples and that God's life – of which we are a part – is growing to reach others. So, reflect on the web of relationships in which you live. Who are the other people with whom your life is connected? Give thanks for these people. Hold them in prayer before God.

### Frieze 11 – Impressions

In front of you is some sand. You remove your socks and shoes. Tread in the sand to leave your footprints (and/or handprints). Step back and look at them. Where you have walked (and placed your hands) has left an impression. What will be left of us when we've left? What traces will we leave? Will the evidence be compelling? What will the surviving witnesses say? How will they know we were here? Will the future be better because of what we did with our present? What will be left of us when we've left? Artist Andy King has interpreted Mary Stevenson's powerful poem, *Footprints in the Sand*, to help us experience how the Lord walks with us and leaves His impressions in our lives as we leave our impressions in the lives of others.

