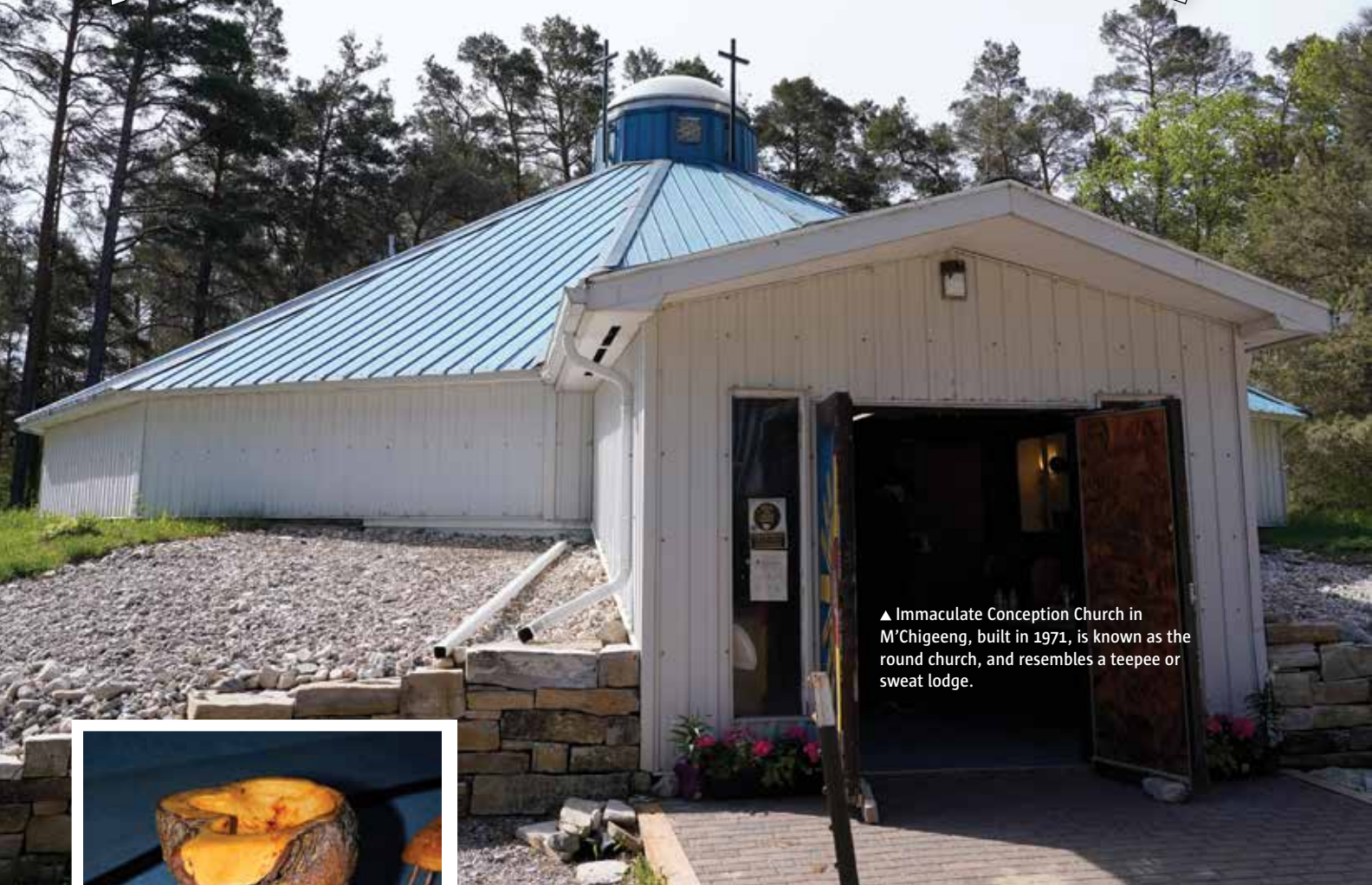


M'Chigeeng's Immaculate Conception Church

A SERVICE UNLIKE ANY I'VE SEEN

WRITTEN BY STEVE PAIKIN
PHOTOS BY MIKE DAVIS



▲ Immaculate Conception Church in M'Chigeeng, built in 1971, is known as the round church, and resembles a teepee or sweat lodge.



◀ Indigenous traditions are respected in this church.

Text on sign reads:
"A GREAT LADY CAME DOWN ON A CLOUD AND LANDED ON A GIANT TURTLE AND COMMANDED THE TURTLE TO GO ASHORE AND THATS WHAT MADE SAINT JOSEPH ISLAND. NATIVE LEGEND."

I have seen the Catholic mass performed at the Vatican as well as in churches across Europe and Canada. But I have never seen another mass performed the way they do it at the Church of the Immaculate Conception in M'Chigeeng First Nation, on Manitoulin Island.

M'Chigeeng, a community of 2,600 people, including nearly 1,000 on-reserve, on the North Channel of Lake Huron, was once known as West Bay. But in 1974, the territory was renamed with an Ojibway word meaning "village enclosed by stepped cliffs." The picturesque Cup and Saucer Trail is nearby.

The Indigenous presence on the world's largest freshwater island dates back thousands of years, and relations between First Nations and the European settlers have not always been harmonious since the Jesuits arrived 150 years ago. But what's happening at

the local church is enough to make you believe in the possibilities of reconciliation.

Co-mingling

Every Sunday, Father Louis-Martin Cloutier, who arrived here in 2021, leads a Catholic service that incorporates many elements of Indigenous culture. The result is a beautiful co-mingling of Catholic rites and Indigenous traditions.

For example, when the original church, with its more conventional design, burned down in 1971, it was rebuilt to resemble a teepee — circular in construction. Yes, there are paintings on the walls that chronicle the 14 stations of the cross, which depict the various moments of Jesus Christ's last day on earth. But the paintings were done in the 1980s by the esteemed local Indigenous artist Leland Bell and look dramatically different from the depictions seen in more conventional churches. Yes, there is a large depiction of Christ's crucifixion, but there are also Indigenous dreamcatchers sprinkled high overhead around the church.

Where other Catholic services would feature the spreading of incense, this service begins with an Indigenous associate, Debbie Ense, performing a smudging ceremony for every person in the congregation. Debbie has been a Diocesan Order of Service for 12 years at this church; it's a unique designation within the Sault Ste. Marie diocese, which aims to bring Catholic and Indigenous traditions together. It's proving to be a wonderful way for congregants, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike, to feel all are embraced.

Mass in English and Ojibway

During the mass, the Lord's



▲ The central peak of the church shows the Thunderbird of M'Chigeeng First Nation.



▲ Seating surrounds the sanctuary. Dreamcatchers are displayed high overhead.

Prayer is recited in both English and Ojibway. Hymns are sung in English and Ojibway. And when Father Cloutier invites parishioners to reach out to their neighbours and proclaim, "Peace be with you," it feels like something special when Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike shake hands.

"We're all very proud of our church," says Father Cloutier. "Everybody is so

open and accepting. And we think by showing respect for Indigenous culture and doing things together, we can promote friendship and reconciliation."

When I asked Debbie whether this coming together of traditions has overcome past difficulties, she's quick to say: "I don't think we've overcome it." But she adds, "The Anishinabek way of praying and the Catholic way

of praying share spirituality and respect and love."

And it's on display every Sunday in M'Chigeeng. Wouldn't it be something to see this approach spread all over Ontario? **NEV**

Steven Paikin is a journalist, author, and documentary producer. He was anchor of TVO's The Agenda with Steve Paikin and is now co-host of the weekly political podcast #onpoli.



◀ Stations of the cross like this one, are represented by paintings of Leland Bell.



▲ Close up view of the altar.



◀ The entrance seen from the sanctuary.

Santa Maria Trailer Resort & Cottages
 
SPACIOUS MANITOULIN PRIVACY!
  
 Cottages, trailer sites, private sandy shore
 Heated swimming pool, tennis courts,
 mini-putt, saunas, playground & more!

705.377.5870 | 200 Square Bay Rd., Spring Bay, ON
 info@santamariaresort.ca | www.santamariaresort.ca

PEEK thru my WINDOW
Custodial Home Decor & Giftware

NEW OWNERS!
 19 Toronto Street South, Markdale
226.452.2001
 Peekthrumywindow.com


LEMON DROP INTERIOR DESIGN
 Interior Design & Renovations
 We take care of all of your Interior Design & Renovations needs!
SERVING HALTON HILLS
 Studio: **905.877.6305**
 56 Main St. S., Georgetown
 lemondropinteriordesign.com
 lemondrop.design

DD Pools & Spas

 Pool & Spa Installations • Equipment Sales & Service
 Water Analysis • Safety Covers • Replacement Liners
 Retail Store Open 7 Days a Week
 78 First St. Orangeville, ON L9W 2E4
519-942-8113


FARMHOUSE
Studio on Fifth

 FOLLOW ME ON YOUTUBE  @FarmhouseStudioOnFifth


CREEMORE BAKERY

 Come give us a visit at
 148 Mill St. in Creemore
705-466-5621
 CreemoreBakery.ca