

Island church celebrates centenary

Cottagers take boats to Sunday services

BY CHRISTOPHER BUNTING

It is a place of peace and serenity which for generations of families has been the one constant in an ever-changing world.

In the summer of 1914, St. Peter on-the-Rock – a unique and picturesque island church ironically located at the junction of Devil’s Elbow and Hell’s Gate channels in Stoney Lake, Ontario – greeted its first parishioners and began what is now a century-old tradition of worship and fellowship. Many of the families who filled the simple white church’s pews during that first summer are still represented at the church 100 years later, together with countless others who have become part of the community over succeeding generations.

Stoney Lake has a strong sense of identity and history. “This lake has rare and enduring institutions developed for a summer community,” says Patrick Bunting, a former churchwarden of St. Peter’s and chair of the anniversary steering committee. “For its part, St. Peter’s is a wonderful place of worship – a church surrounded by water and open to the beauty of nature on all sides. For the past 100 summers, hundreds of cottagers have boated to the island in all kinds of vessels for two morning services each Sunday.”

This coming summer will see a series of activities designed for a lake community that was first established in the latter part of the 19th century. The centerpiece of the celebration will be held on the weekend of July 19-20. On the Saturday evening, there will be a pot-luck supper at the Juniper Island Pavilion – a structure that has been the social centre of the lake since its opening in 1885 – and hundreds are expected to attend.

The next morning at 10:30 will see the service of thanksgiving and celebration at the church. More than 15 clergy, including



St. Peter on-the-Rock on Stoney Lake will be the focal point of festivities this summer. All are invited to attend.

archbishops and bishops from across Canada, will participate, representing several decades of spiritual leadership at St. Peter’s. Covered seating for more than 550 people will be available inside and outside the church, while scores of volunteers will be deployed to help ensure everything from boat docking to sound systems run smoothly. Archbishop Colin Johnson will preside at the service. St. Peter’s has a long tradition of music and a love of singing. Favourite hymns will be part of the service, and the music will be enhanced by some renowned and beloved Canadian musicians, all under the direction of cottager and St. Peter’s music coordinator, Helen Batten.

St. Peter on-the-Rock operates as a full parish church with a rectory (a cottage) and with the same governance infrastructure typical of any city church, but it is only open during July, August and on Thanksgiving weekend. On most Sundays during the summer, the Sunday school is packed with life-jacketed children, while the altar is decorated with flora and fauna from the lake. After the main service, parishioners gather on the rocks near the church for coffee and a catch-up with friends and neighbours. For many, Sunday mornings are a magical experience.

The Rev. Canon Timothy Elliott and



A young Patrick Bunting (rear seat, far left) leaves for a Sunday service at St. Peter’s in July, 1959.

the Rev. Alan Wotherspoon are co-chairing the liturgy team. They are responsible for the sometimes delicate task of putting together a memorable service of thanksgiving involving many bishops and clergy, most of whom have done summer duty at St. Peter’s over the decades.

“This is a very simple island with no grand rooms for clergy vesting, so trying to get everyone organized for the service will be really fun,” says Canon Elliott, who resided with his family on the island during the summers of 1988, ’89 and ’90. “I think what we all share – clergy who are now spread around the country, churchwardens, lay leaders through the decades, and parishioners – is a true love of St. Peter’s and this wonderful little island.”

The process of selecting ministers for summer duty has been the same throughout St. Peter’s first century. In consulta-

tion with the area bishop of Trent-Durham, candidates are selected from clergy within the Diocese of Toronto. They are then invited, with their families, to have a “working holiday,” covering either July or August, for a three-year term.

The church shares the island with Clergy Cottage, a water-side summer home with superb swimming and boating facilities. For many clergy families, these summers at the lake are wonderful experiences and have turned a number of them into Stoney Lake cottagers themselves. For some clergy, these are summers of adventure, too, as when one minister spent an entire night lost on the lake in a small tin boat, while another “stole” a cottager’s boat from the marina, thinking it was the church’s boat. These and many other stories have become part of the lore of St. Peter’s.

Before the official anniversary weekend, there will be other activities to mark the occasion. Everyone loves to see and explore cottages and homes, especially if they belong to someone else. This summer will feature one of the best-ever cottage tours. In keeping with the centennial theme, on Saturday, July 12, a selection of Stoney Lake cottages at least 100 years old will be opened to the general public for viewing. These cottages were inhabited when St. Peter’s was consecrated and officially opened, and they are another window into the history of the Stoney Lake community.

“The cottages being showcased have a history with St. Peter on-the-Rock in many ways,” explains tour organizer Barb Rimmer. “Some served as original places for St. Peter’s early church services, while others were used for Sunday school early in the last century, while yet others belonged to churchwardens or were used for special occasions such as baptisms or weddings.”

Patrick Bunting says, “The community has already shown incredible generosity through their volunteerism, by billeting priests, musicians and other visitors for the special weekend activities, and through their financial support. We are looking forward to welcoming everyone to this once-in-a-lifetime celebration.”

Christopher Bunting is a member of St. Peter on-the-Rock, Stoney Lake, and Grace Church on-the-Hill, Toronto. For more information about St. Peter on-the-Rock’s centennial celebrations, visit www.stpetersontherock.ca.

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