

A Letter From

Pastor Dave Rochford



On Sunday, August 20, we will at both morning services mark the conclusion of the 250th year since Methodism came to our fair town (at least officially). We will also enjoy a potluck together at noon, so mark the day! In fact, it was on August 20 – a sweltering Saturday – that Joseph Pilmore, personal representative from John Wesley and English Methodism, arrived by boat at Jamestown

and made his way by carriage to Williamsburg (passing right by the spot where one day we would gather to worship).

Pilmore was an unlikely candidate to bring thoughtful Methodist leadership to the capital of English North America in 1772. The illegitimate son of a civil engineer and a house servant, he came of age in a society that wholeheartedly stigmatized the “ill-born.” Were it not for his decision to attend a revival led by John Wesley in a neighboring Yorkshire town, it is hard to imagine Joseph ever escaping the life of a day laborer...but escape he did, taking a Methodist preaching circuit and ultimately (to his own surprise) volunteering to be one of English Methodism’s first two envoys to



the Colonies. (We may even get to hear him reflect a bit on the involvement of Providence along the strange path that led him to Williamsburg, with such great consequence for generations of Methodists – right up to the present!)

Having spent the past eighteen months reflecting on Pilmore’s visit and the evolution of our own story as a congregation, I’m still amazed by three themes that jump out.

First, the messenger would have seemed to many back in England to have little promise. Pilmore had his own doubts, both about himself and our particular mission field: he initially thought that Williamsburg offered little prospect for the planting of a Methodist society (that is, a web of small groups to cultivate spiritual growth). Given the dominance of staid Anglican Bruton Parish, would Methodist revivalists find a beachhead? The outcomes of his efforts, which he could not likely have imagined, really do point to a guiding hand outside the affairs of men and women.



Second, although I had barely heard of Pilmore in the course of my Methodist journey (his name IS on a plaque on the front of our church, but almost nowhere else!), I would have reasoned that he was a minister. But he was not! No, he was more like you than me: a committed layperson who felt both deep conviction to serve God as well as doubt, and was often uncertain as to how best to serve.

Finally, Joseph (and all the early Methodist itinerant preachers) were crystal clear from where transformative power would come: the Holy Spirit of God, moving among and turning up the gifts of lay people, just like himself. For more than a decade, the Methodist Revival transformed hearts right through the tempestuous days of the Revolution with minimal contact with clergy. By the mid-1780s, circuit-riding clergy were at last assigned to the new Williamsburg Methodist Episcopal Church, but these were responsible for dozens of other modest churches, spreading from Richmond all along the Peninsula. The inception and growth of our movement depended not on clergy (the experts), but on passionately engaged laity (the pioneers!).



These many years later, I think we may have reached such a watershed moment. We have three clergy now, and our webs of intimate, accountable relationships and necessarily few. But our hundreds of engaged laity have *thousands of such relationships*. If Methodists will be useful to God in transforming this community for the next 250 years, then a new wind may blow among us again: small bands of friends reading the Bible, tackling spiritual challenges posed by daily life, and praying for each other earnestly. (Hey, it's been done before, right?)

That need not only be Pilmore's courageous legacy. It can also be ours.

-Pastor Dave Rochford