



## DISCOVERY

edited by  
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### A Revealing Letter from Joseph Pilmore

In May 1971, Dr. Arthur Bruce Moss, distinguished Pastor Emeritus of John Street United Methodist Church, New York City, spent considerable time in England. During his sojourn he visited, for the greater part of a day, the Rev. E. Ralph Bates, Warden of "The New Room," Bristol. Mr. Bates showed Dr. Moss a revealing letter which is on indefinite loan from the Methodist Archives in London to "The New Room," and which, through the kind permission of Dr. John C. Bowmer, the Methodist archivist, and at the desire of Mr. Bates, has been transcribed for inclusion in this issue of DISCOVERY.

Joseph Pilmore, the author of the letter, was one of the first two Wesleyan missionaries who volunteered for work in America at the Conference in Leeds in 1769. Together with Richard Boardman, the other preacher who volunteered for the American work, Pilmore sailed for the New World and landed near Philadelphia, October 21, 1769. For the next several years he wrote an account of his experiences, and his *Journal*, recently published by the Historical Society of the former Philadelphia Methodist Conference, is one of the few extant documents concerning the beginnings of Methodism in America.

The Pilmore letter included here is undated and the addressee is not identified. It was sent to England in care of Miss Bosanquet who is undoubtedly Mary Bosanquet, an ardent Methodist who later married John Fletcher of Madeley. Her home was at Cross Hall near Leeds. It was a large house in which she cared for orphan children, and the preachers in the Leeds and adjoining Birstall Circuits would be familiar with it. In 1769 Wesley's Conference was held at Leeds, and it is more than likely that Pilmore, who attended the Conference, met Miss Bosanquet at that time. Apparently he wrote to her and enclosed this letter for the favor

of delivery by her to a preacher whom she and Pilmore both knew. It seems likely that the preacher was Daniel Bumstead. Mr. Bates points out that "at the time of the 1769 Conference Bumstead was finishing his term in the Birstall Circuit, in which Miss Bosanquet's home was probably situated. He then moved to Leeds, nearby, and was still there until August 1771. Thus it is likely that Pilmore met Bumstead at the Conference—maybe at Miss Bosanquet's house—and when he wrote the letter from New York, it was still easy for Miss Bosanquet to deliver it."

Dr. Moss believes that the date of the letter can be narrowed to within the span of a few months by a study of the internal evidence. The third paragraph of Pilmore's letter, for example, indicates that John Wesley had written Pilmore explaining that no more preachers had volunteered for the American work. Since Pilmore came to America in 1769 and Francis Asbury in 1771, Pilmore's letter must fall between these dates, possibly after the Conference of 1770. The letter furthermore was written from New York. Pilmore reached New York on November 8, 1770, remaining until February 10, 1771 (see *The Journal of Joseph Pilmore*, Philadelphia, 1969, pp. 64-76) and returned again to New York May 14, 1771 to remain until August 12 (*ibid.*, pp. 89-98). It must have been during one of these periods that Pilmore wrote his letter. If the itineraries of Captain Webb and Robert Williams could be established, the date of the letter could be even more accurately pinpointed, since Pilmore says that at the time of his writing the former was in New York and the latter in Maryland.

It should also be noted that Pilmore in paragraph seven refers to an incident that took place at Whitemarsh on September 16, 1770 (*ibid.*, p. 59), thus indicating that the letter was written after that date.

Dr. Moss points out that the letter is especially interesting because in paragraph five it contains the first extant reference to the difficulties experienced by the itinerants in America because of their "want of ordination." To me it is of even greater interest to note Pilmore's positive attitude about securing such ordination and his belief that if the Methodists would form a separate denomination they would soon have "the largest congregations in these two cities."

These statements throw more light on the split that developed between Pilmore and John Wesley, who Pilmore says in his *Journal* treated him as "the foulest offender and an enemy to God and Mankind" (*ibid.*, p. 206). Is it possible that Pilmore's correspondent showed Pilmore's letter to John Wesley, who became very angry at Pilmore's suggestions concerning ordination and the possibility of a separate church and subsequently treated Pilmore in a way

that both hurt and mystified him? Bumstead, who Mr. Bates believes was the recipient of Pilmore's letter, was a friend of Wesley's and on at least three later occasions Wesley visited Bumstead's home. (See *Wesley's Journal*, Curnock Edition, 1938, Vol. VII, pp. 42 and 227, and Vol. VIII, p. 117.)

Pilmore's letter, with additional notes by Dr. Arthur Bruce Moss, follows:

New York

My Dear Dear Br.

You much esteemed favour came safe to hand, & was made a Blessing to my Soul. Nothing gives me so much pleasure as to hear that you are well, & that the pleasure of the Lord prospers in your Hands. When we preach and live the Gospel, this must necessarily be the Case. It was the pure Doctrine & upright lives of the primitive Xtians & preachers that prevailed over all the opposition of Jews and Gentiles, & stood as a barrier against all the projects which a Subtile Devil could Invent & this in all ages of the World will stand as a sure Basis, that will support every Minister of the Gospel under all his Trials and Tribulations.

From what you write of Yorkshire I am led to believe "wherein sin abounded Grace hath much more abounded" O! Grace, Grace! Unbounded Grace! "Ho! ye despairing Sinners, come, & trust upon the Lord"

I have been waiting with eager expectation for some of the Brethren to come over to our Macedonia & help us, but Ah me! There are so many things to give up, before one can cross the Atlantic, that it seems to be too much even for a Methodist preacher! I find by Mr. Wesley's letter that none were willing to come, so it is very uncertain whether ever we shall have an opportunity of returning to Old England or no. But blessed be God, we know what was our<sup>1</sup> Intention in leaving all that was dear to us, in order to visit those dear, dear Americans: & as we came in singleness in heart, the Lord has greatly blessed us both, in N. York & Philadelphia. Our Congregations are very large, & very serious; trifling [sic] seems to have no place at present for Sinners are engaged about the vast important affairs of the Invisible World, even the poor Negroes are turning to God, & seeking to wash their robes and make them white in the Blood of the Lamb.

A few days ago the Lord was pleased to manifest his Love to a poor Black,<sup>2</sup> her Mistress has persecuted her very much be-

<sup>1</sup> By the use of the plurals "we" and "our," Pilmore is including Richard Boardman in his thinking.

<sup>2</sup> The "black classes," both men and women, were notable at John Street from its beginnings.

cause she came to the Methodist Church, but she thought it was better to be "beaten for hearing the word of God here; than to burn in Hell to all eternity." We have about twenty Black women that meet in one Class, & I think upon the whole they are as happy as any Class we have got.

Many people of Superior rank<sup>3</sup> come to hear the word and are very friendly. The chief difficulty we labour under is want of Ordination & I believe we shall be Obliged to procure it by some means or other. It is not in America as it is in England, for there is no Church that is one Establish'd more than another. All Sects have equal authority with the Church of England;<sup>4</sup> I do believe if we should form a Church we should soon have the largest congregations in these two Cities. The fields are white already, but the labourers are very few, there are hundreds of Sinners in this Country who dont hear a Sermon above once a quarter & some for not half a Year, & many of them would gladly hear, if they had anybody to preach to them; but in many places they have not a Minister of any Denomination for forty or fifty miles.

What a field for Methodist preachers! Whils't I was in Pensylvania [sic] I had the favour of opening the New Methodist Church about twenty miles from Philadelphia; and what was most remarkable, the poor plain Country people have called it Bethel, i.e. *the House of God*.<sup>5</sup>

I have preach'd several times in an English Church, and the people flock'd to gather from all Quarters in such multitudes that I was oblig'd at last to stand upon a Table in the Churchyard, & to preach the Word to a crowded Multitude who stood all around under the Shady Trees.<sup>6</sup>

Perhaps you will say I speak too much in favour of the Americans, but I do assure you one half is not yet tould [sic] you. And I freely wish, that you would come and prove the truth of what I say, if you will but come, I assure you that you will want nothing that is good. The people here are very kind & take plea-

<sup>3</sup> Pilmore readily made friendship among people of this quality. So warm and effective were these ties that he almost became Assistant Rector in Trinity Parish after his return to America following the Revolutionary War. The group in Trinity Church that supported his candidacy left Trinity to establish Christ Church. They built a notable edifice at Ann and Nassau Streets where Pilmore served as their Rector for ten years before returning to St. Paul's in Philadelphia. See Pilmore's *Journal*, p. 245. Asbury had occasional contacts with Pilmore during these ten years. See *Asbury's Journal*, Abingdon Press, 1958, Vol. II, p. 19.

<sup>4</sup> Pilmore's definition of the political position of the Established Church was true of New York, New Jersey and Pennsylvania, but not the other colonies.

<sup>5</sup> Pilmore refers to Bethel in his *Journal* under the name of Matachin spelled in a variety of ways. See index to Pilmore's *Journal*.

<sup>6</sup> See Pilmore's *Journal*, p. 59.

sure in providing [sic] for the Methodist preachers.

Robt Williams is in Maryland preaching to the poor Convicts & I trust the Lord makes him useful. Mr Webb is now in New York. He is a genuine Wesley & labours hard to promote the Cause. His Gifts are small, but he is very zealous and honest, & that you know is very precious in a preacher.

I could still add more but you see my paper is just done, & therefore must take my leave of you for the present wishing you an increase of every Gift and Grace necessary for that office to which the Lord has called you unto

I am Dear Brother whilst yours for ever

Joseph Pilmore