In 1786 the membership of St. George's Methodist Episcopal Church in Philadelphia included both blacks and whites. However, the white members met that year and decided that thereafter black members should sit only in the balcony. Two black Sunday worshippers, Absalom Jones (1746-1818) and Richard Allen (1760-1831), whose enthusiasm for the Methodist Church had brought many blacks into the congregation, learned of the decision only when, on the following Sunday, ushers tapped them on the shoulder during the opening prayers, and demanded that they move to the balcony without waiting for the end of the prayer. They walked out, followed by the other black members.

Absalom Jones conferred with William White, Episcopal Bishop of Philadelphia, who agreed to accept the group as an Episcopal parish. Jones would serve as lay reader, and, after a period of study, would be ordained and serve as rector.

Allen wanted the group to remain Methodist, and in 1793 he left to form a Methodist congregation. In 1816 he left the Methodists to form a new denomination, the African Methodist Episcopal Church (Ame). Jones (ordained deacon and priest in 1795 and 1802) and Allen (ordained deacon and elder in 1799 and 1816) were the first two black Americans to receive formal ordination in any denomination.

The African Methodist Episcopal Church Zion (Ame Zion) formed in New York in about 1796 for similar reasons. The two groups were well organized before they heard of each other. The Christian Methodist Episcopal Church, also historically black, was an offshoot of 1870 of the Methodist Episcopal Church, South. (The Methodists split into North and South before the War of 1861-1865, and have since re-united.) These three black groups, and the United Methodist Church, and some other denominations of Methodist origin, are committed in principle to eventual union, but bureaucracies move slowly. Meanwhile, the groups are united in doctrine, and members of each are free to worship and to receive the Sacraments with members of the others.

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Before the American Revolution, there were no bishops in the colonies (partly because the British government was reluctant to give the colonies the kind of autonomy that this would have implied, and partly because many of the colonists were violently opposed to their presence). After the Revolution, the establishment of an American episcopate became imperative. Samuel Seabury was the first American to be consecrated, in 1784 (see 14 Nov), and in 1787 William White and Samuel Provoost, having been elected to the bishoprics of Pennsylvania and New York respectively, sailed to England and were consecrated bishops on 14 February by the Archbishop of Canterbury, the Archbishop of York, the Bishop of Bath and Wells, and the Bishop of Peterborough.

William White was born in Philadelphia in 1747, went to England in 1770 to be ordained deacon and priest, returned in 1772 and became first an assistant and then the rector of the Church of Christ and Saint Peter in Philadelphia. He served as Chaplain of the Continental Congress from 1777 to 1789, and then as Chaplain of the Senate.

White was largely responsible for the Constitution of the Protestant Episcopal Church in the United States of America. At his suggestion, the system of church government was established more or less as we have it today. (What follows is a rough draft. I welcome notes of correction and clarification.) Only a bishop can ordain a deacon or priest, and only bishops (normally at least three) can consecrate a bishop. When a bishop dies or retires, a new bishop is elected by a convention in his diocese, in which clergy sit in the upper house and lay delegates (elected by the vestries of the local congregations) sit in the lower house, and a majority in each house is required to elect. (Afterwards, a majority of bishops and a majority of Standing Committees (each diocese has an elected Standing Committee) are required to confirm.) National business is conducted by the General Convention, which meets every three years and consists for voting purposes of three Houses: Bishops, Clerical Deputies, and Lay Deputies. A majority of each is required to pass a measure. (All the Deputies meet and debate together and are called the House of Deputies, but they vote separately whenever a few voters request it, which means whenever it might affect the outcome.) In all this, the Episcopal Church undertakes to follow, as nearly as modern circumstances permit, the government of the early church as
attested back at least to the second and third centuries. A section follows from White’s writings on Church Government.

The power of electing a superior order of ministers ought to be in the clergy and laity together, they being both interested in the choice. In England, the bishops are appointed by the civil authority, which was a usurpation of the crown at the Norman conquest, but since confirmed by acts of parliament. The primitive churches were generally supplied by popular elections; even in the city of Rome, the privilege of electing the bishop continued with the people to the tenth or eleventh century, and near those times there are resolves of councils, that none should be promoted to ecclesiastical dignities, but by election of the clergy and people. It cannot be denied that this right vested in numerous bodies, occasioned great disorders; which it is expected will be avoided, when the people shall exercise the right by representation. Let us next take a view of the grounds on which the authority of episcopacy is asserted. The advocates for this form maintain, that there having been an episcopal power originally lodged by Jesus Christ with his apostles, and by them generally exercised in person, but sometimes by delegation (as in the instances of Timothy and Titus) the same was conveyed by them before their decease to one pastor in each church, which generally comprehended all the Christians in a city and a convenient surrounding district. Thus were created the apostolic successors, who on account of their settled residence are called bishops by restraint; whereas the apostles themselves were bishops at large, exercising episcopal power over all the churches, except in the case of St James, who from the beginning was bishop of Jerusalem. From this time the word “episcopos,” used in the New Testament indiscriminately with the word “presbyteros” (particularly in the 20th chapter of the Acts where the same persons are called “episcopi” and “presbyteroi”), became appropriated to the superior order of ministers. That the apostles were thus succeeded by an order of ministers superior to pastors in general, episcopalian think they prove by the testimonies of the ancient fathers, and from the improbability that so great an innovation (as some conceive it) could have found general and peaceable possession in the 2d or 3d century, when episcopacy is on both sides acknowledged to have been prevalent. The argument is here concisely stated, but (as is believed) impartially.