In 1745, Francis Asbury volunteered for missionary service in America, following which he increasingly identified himself with the Methodists. Working all day as an apprentice to a craftsman, he led Methodist meetings at night. Finally, just before his twenty-second birthday, he was accepted by Wesley as a self-educated, full-time lay preacher. Four years later, he offered to seek converts in America.

Docking at Philadelphia in 1771, the 26-year-old Asbury busied himself immediately with twin passions: saving souls and shaping lives. He preached Christ's forgiving love, invited people to save their souls by responding to Christ, and showed them how to shape their lives as Christ's followers.

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Therefore his fellow lay preachers acceded to his suggestion that the problem of an ordained ministry be referred
to Wesley. No Methodist in the newly formed United States could administer baptism and communion. To remedy this situation quickly, some preachers considered ordaining each other. Asbury counseled patience and seeking Wesley's guidance.

Wesley's answer reached America in early November 1784, carried by Thomas Coke, who, short and portly in stature, embodied the weight of Wesley's authority and the solidity of scriptural precedent. Biblical people had not voted on their prophets. God designated them and then guided their choice of successors, as God directed Elijah to throw his mantle over Elisha's shoulders.

Wesley understood himself as Methodism's Elijah. Now, in 1784, he needed an Elisha to lead the Methodists in the United States. Praying, he became convinced that God had two Elijahs in mind: Thomas Coke and Asbury. He instructed Coke to carry his decision to Asbury, who commented that "it may be of God." But he would only know God's will to the point of certainty by inviting the preachers to vote on Wesley's nominations.

Asbury never allowed his preachers to vote. He emphasized that his Methodism was not a democracy. But Asbury was fathering a new Methodism in a new democracy. So he gathered the preachers in Baltimore at Christmas 1784. Accepting Wesley's choices as nominations, they voted unanimously to elect Coke and Asbury as superintendents of the new Methodist Episcopal Church in America.

From that moment on, Asbury's Methodism drew closer and closer to the American people. His Methodists, both preachers and laity, did not always have a vote, but their voices were heard. When his strong anti-slavery stance, which echoed Wesley's position, angered them, he laid it aside in favor of saving souls. When he discovered that people enjoyed Bible-thumping, shout-raising, toe-tapping camp meeting worship, he made it a staple of the Methodist religious diet.

Asbury died in 1816, the father of a highly successful American Methodism. When his brethren voted for him in 1784, Asbury had 15,000 members and 83 preachers to shepherd. Thirty years later, he herded 212,000 members, 700 ordained pastors, and 2,000 lay preachers.

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