



# Associated Baptist Press

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## Missouri Baptist executive resigns, citing controversy

By Rob Marus

JEFFERSON CITY, Mo. (ABP) -- Missouri Baptist Convention Executive Director Jim Hill has resigned, saying he cannot work with conservative leaders now in control of the Missouri Baptist Convention. The announcement came during a special meeting of the state convention's executive board Oct. 4.

Upon the recommendation of the board's administrative committee, the board approved a severance package for Hill that includes 12 months of pay and benefits, pay for accrued vacation time and the title to an automobile owned by the convention.

The board's discussion and vote came in closed session, and neither Hill nor convention president Bob Collins announced a vote count. However, several board members later told a reporter that the only dissent to the severance package was expressed by Jay Scribner, pastor of First Baptist Church in Branson. Scribner was elected president of the Missouri Baptist Convention by conservative forces in 1999.

In a statement to the board later released to the media, Hill gave five reasons for his departure:

1. His diminishing leadership role with elected and appointed MBC leaders. "Most of the standing convention committees now function without my input and are not responsive to my suggestions and recommendations," Hill said. "I do not agree with the decisions and recommendations some committees are preparing or with their approach to their responsibilities."

2. Increasing division on the executive board that Hill feels he would not be able to breach, especially after fundamentalists gain a majority on the board following the MBC annual meeting at the end of October. "I believe the new executive board will be unlikely to support many of the recommendations I would make during the coming year. It is clear that some board members do not have confidence in my leadership."

3. Concern that fundamentalist leaders might move to de-fund and instruct the executive board to file lawsuits against The Baptist Home and other MBC-related institutions that have removed themselves from the control of the convention's nominating committee. "Some are interested in filing litigation against these institutions," he said. "I certainly hope these actions are not approved by the messengers. However, I believe they will be recommended. I do not feel I can be involved in the filing of lawsuits against any of our institutions."

4. An increasing inability to implement the MBC's new strategic plan. "My primary passion has been leading Missouri Baptists to implement our New Directions strategy as we seek to help our churches become healthy and effective," Hill stated. "However, it seems clear to me that in some situations my leadership has become the issue. Some individuals have been hesitant to become involved in New Directions because they do not trust me. I regret an environment that would cause people that do not know me to decide they do not trust me."

5. Basic disagreement with the conservative group that has now taken over the convention's leadership. "It is clear that Project 1000 leaders are selecting those that will serve in our convention and are

seeking to determine the future agenda for the convention and our staff," he said. "I do not agree with the Project 1000 agenda or the political processes they have utilized to implement it."

Hill noted that he has no immediate plans for his next job. "Bettie Jo and I have talked about it; we have never resigned a ministry not knowing where we were going, but we felt like this time that was what the Lord wanted us to do," he said. "I think the severance package was generous, and will allow us [to seek another avenue of ministry] without undue pressure."

Collins, a conservative, said he believed "this process has been handled in a Christ-like manner." In a press conference following the announcement of Hill's resignation, Collins described the event, as well as the recent actions by several institutions to remove themselves from MBC control, as "tragic." However, when asked if he should share part of the blame as a participant in the fundamentalist Project 1000 movement, Collins said: "I'm not sure that I would make a connection.. As far as the connection between those [actions of Project 1000 supporters] and the institutions and agencies becoming self-perpetuating and Dr. Hill's decision, I can't speak for them or him. I don't necessarily believe that."

Randy Fullerton, pastor of Fee Fee Baptist Church in suburban St. Louis and chairman of the administrative committee, vehemently disagreed with Collins' assessment of the situation, saying Project 1000 had everything to do with Hill's resignation. "It all has to do with their leadership style, it all has to do with their refusal to cooperate with him," Fullerton said. "He could see the handwriting on the wall when the committees refuse to work with him and then the nominating committee, the continuing review committee and the credentials committee all reported to Project 1000 at a meeting where he was present and they treated him like a dog." Fullerton was referring to the August Project 1000 meeting at Concord Baptist Church in Jefferson City, where several speakers openly criticized Hill from the pulpit even though he was in attendance.

Fullerton said that Hill decided to resign while there was still a sympathetic majority on the executive board because fundamentalists had made it clear that they would fire him and not provide him with any severance in their first meeting following the MBC annual meeting. "This is the only way that he could do this and provide for his family," Fullerton said.

Fullerton was also highly critical of Project 1000 leaders whom he said drove Hill to this decision. "These people are not conservatives; they are fundamentalists. We are the conservatives," he said. "Fundamentalists are mean and cruel and hateful and they have an agenda, and they don't care who they have to run over to get to it."

Fullerton said Hill "is probably the greatest executive director that the Missouri Baptist Convention has ever had, and we've lost him because of the way they treated him."

Other executive board members said they were shocked by Hill's resignation. "I'm numb . I don't know what to say, what to think . I don't know what this means for Missouri Baptists," said Sondra Allen, a member of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City. "It's a dark day in Missouri Baptist history."

Martin Barker, pastor of Bethany Baptist Church in Marceline, said, "Today is the first time I've ever been ashamed to be a Missouri Baptist."

Allen noted that she was rotating off the executive board and didn't know if she would continue supporting the Missouri Baptist Convention. "Now I'm at a point where I have to decide what's right for me," she said.

Fullerton echoed Allen's sentiments, and hinted that the formation of a breakaway moderate Baptist convention in Missouri may now be imminent.

Citing Romans 8:28, he said: "Out of all this bad, there's something that's going to happen in Missouri that will create a greater ministry than Missouri Baptists have ever had before. A large group of Missouri Baptists will decide to give up on convention politics and start doing Kingdom work for God, and if they have to do that outside the Missouri Baptist Convention, they will."

While conservatives have previously taken that step in moderate-led states of Virginia and Texas, to date no moderates have formed separate state groups. Moderates have banded together nationally, however, in the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship, which provides alternative ministries to the conservative-dominated Southern Baptist Convention.

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-- Rob Marus, coordinator of Mainstream Missouri Baptists, takes over as ABP's Washington bureau chief Oct. 16.

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