



# Associated Baptist Press

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### Missouri Baptists launch breakaway state convention

By Bob Allen

BRIDGETON, Mo. (ABP) -- Saying they are tired of denominational politics in the Missouri Baptist Convention, 350 Southern Baptists met April 19-20 in suburban St. Louis to launch the Baptist General Convention of Missouri.

"It's going to be a convention for people who don't want to fight anymore," said Randy Fullerton, who presided over the meeting. Fullerton is pastor of Fee Fee Baptist Church in Bridgeton, Mo., the host church for the organizational meeting.

The new convention's vision statement says in part, "We desire to leave the strife and conflict of the past behind and move forward as we seek to fulfill the commission of our Lord Jesus Christ to make disciples of all nations."

The new group pledges "to be inclusive in our fellowship" and to provide financial support for the Southern Baptist Convention and "all our Missouri Baptist institutions."

While the convention "will welcome inquiries and requests for information" from churches and individuals, "we do not intend to actively recruit congregations," the vision statement also says.

"We desire to leave the strife and move forward, even if that means walking backward into the future," Jim Hill, former executive director of the Missouri Baptist Convention, said in describing the new convention's vision.

Factional strife has dominated Missouri Baptist life in recent years, as conservatives and moderates faced off in fierce campaigns for leadership posts in the MBC. Conservatives eventually prevailed, and the MBC's popular executive director resigned, saying he could not work with the new leaders. Last year, five moderate-controlled MBC agencies switched to self-perpetuating trustee boards to guard against takeover by conservatives. The MBC responded by escrowing funds and threatening to sue if the agencies don't come back under convention control.

Fullerton said his church, which has avoided taking sides in the long-running controversy, had voted to join the alternative state body out of a desire to put cooperation ahead of politics. "We have been willing to put our money where our mouth is," Fullerton said in describing the 195-year-old congregation's long record of denominational support, "but Fee Fee Baptist Church will not play politics."

"We need some people who are willing to trust each other and work together for the Kingdom of God," Fullerton said in describing the purpose of the meeting. "There is no place for politics in the church."

The group, formed in part to support agencies defunded by the Missouri Baptist Convention, ratified a basic Cooperative Program budget of \$4 million, with 35.75 percent, or about \$1.4 million, earmarked for national and international causes of the Southern Baptist Convention.

The SBC is expected to refuse gifts from the new convention, however. While the denomination recognizes breakaway conservative conventions in two states, Executive Committee President Morris Chapman has indicated he will recommend against doing the same with the new Missouri convention, saying it competes with the conservative-led Missouri Baptist Convention.

"If you choose to join this convention and you want to remain a Southern Baptist church, you can do that very simply," said Sondra Allen, the new convention's secretary.

The convention will advise member churches to deduct 35.75 percent of their monthly Cooperative Program contribution -- the same amount forwarded to SBC causes by the Missouri Baptist Convention -- and send it directly to denominational headquarters in Nashville, Tenn.

"In doing so, you would still be sending money to the SBC," said Allen, a member of First Baptist Church of Jefferson City, Mo. "You would still be a Southern Baptist."

Paul Powell, a member of Third Baptist Church in St. Louis, called for removing the SBC funding portion of the budget. "It's almost for sure we're going to be rejected by the Executive [Committee] of the SBC," he said. "I think many of us here are tired of being kicked around by the fundamentalists."

Fullerton ruled Powell's motion out of order, however, explaining that at that point only the nine incorporators who organized the convention were legally authorized to conduct its affairs.

Later, Powell said: "I think a lot of us are disappointed we are not making the statement we need to be making. I really regret that the incorporators are asking us to support something we don't want to support."

Fullerton replied: "There are a lot of people who want to support the SBC, even though they disagree with them, as long as they don't control us."

"One thing I'm tired of in all our convention politics is if you don't agree with me you're a bad person," Fullerton said.

H.D. Neely, an incorporator from First Baptist Church in Bolivar, said, "We determined way back there if any fences were going to be built, they would be built by the other side."

The budget funds all the institutions and agencies of the Missouri Baptist Convention, adding supplemental monies for five agencies for which the MBC has held funding in escrow after they moved to self-perpetuating boards of trustees. They are the Baptist Home, Missouri Baptist Foundation, Windermere Baptist Conference Center, Word and Way and Missouri Baptist College.

"Our ultimate goal would be to use those, as we reach our budget goal, to completely replace the funds that are in escrow," Allen said.

Dick Lionberger, pastor of First Baptist Church in Savannah, Mo., is president of the new group. St. Louis pastor Owen Taylor is vice president and Jefferson City layperson Sondra Allen is secretary.

All three will serve a one-year term.

Sixteen members of a board of directors will serve rotating terms of one, two and three years.

Core values of the Baptist General Convention of Missouri are as follows:

1. A commitment to the history and heritage of Baptist life in Missouri.
2. A commitment to financial support for all of our Missouri Baptist institutions.
3. A commitment to cooperation with the Southern Baptist Convention.
4. A commitment to the Bible as the Word of God.
5. A commitment to missions and evangelism worldwide.
6. A commitment to priesthood of the believer.
7. A commitment to the autonomy of the local church.

8. A commitment to the inclusion of all Baptists interested in cooperating for missions.
9. A commitment to the church as God's primary agent of his redemptive work.
10. A commitment to religious liberty for all people.

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## **Baptists bring believer's baptism to Christianity's table, Wade says**

By Bob Allen

BRIDGETON, Mo. (ABP) -- If the world's Christians were invited to a covered-dish supper, what would the Baptists bring?

"I'd bring the New Testament teaching of believer's baptism by immersion, and I'd offer it as a gift to the other Christians," said Charles Wade. Why? "That's the sign and symbol of everything that's unique about us."

Wade, executive director of the Baptist General Convention of Texas, spoke about Baptist distinctives at the organizational meeting of the Baptist General Convention of Missouri.

The group, formed in part to support denominational agencies defunded by the Missouri Baptist Convention, met April 19-20. The gathering took place at the 195-year-old Fee Fee Baptist Church in suburban St. Louis, the oldest existing Baptist church west of the Mississippi River.

"There are a whole lot more of you here today than there were Baptists in Missouri when Baptist work got started in Missouri," Wade said to a crowd of about 325 people attending the opening session on Friday afternoon.

Wade touched on several topics that he said, until recently, would not have been controversial, such as whether or not the "Baptist Faith and Message" should be used as a creed.

He quoted from a report during the first Southern Baptist Convention in 1845. "We have constituted for our business no new creed, having a Baptist aversion to any creed but the Bible."

"That is our Southern Baptist heritage, and it goes back a long way," Wade said.

That is in part because early Baptists were persecuted for their beliefs, he said. "Our Baptist forebears were the first to pay the price of persecution at the hands of Protestant Christians".

"Faith in God must be free, or God doesn't want it," Wade said. "There is no other kind, from a Baptist point of view."

A conservative leader in Texas -- criticizing the BGCT for opposing the SBC's use of the 2000 "Baptist Faith and Message" as a theological litmus test -- said recently it "isn't enough" for a Baptist to say he or she believes the Bible.

Wade disagreed. "It is enough to believe the Bible," he said. "The Bible will take you to Jesus and Jesus will introduce you to the Scripture."

Baptists traditionally haven't asked people to affirm a creedal statement of faith, Wade said. "We've said stand on your feet and give your testimony."

"That's the way the Baptists do it, and the rest of the religious world looks at us and they can't believe it."

But Wade said he thinks Baptists' most unique contribution to the Christian faith is believer's baptism.

A lot of churches now baptize by immersion, Wade said, "but they learned it from Baptists."

"We learned it from Jesus," he quipped.

"We don't carry anybody to baptism and we don't coerce them. They come on their own."

"Do you know how important that is?" he asked. "Every Baptist remembers when they were baptized."

"God, as much as he loved us, didn't automatically save us. It doesn't come in your genetic structure. This is an invitation that God gives to a free people."

"Out of that grows everything else," Wade said. "News that good has got to be shared. Everybody's got to know it. So we're a missionary people."

Not all Baptists have felt that way, he acknowledged. Some Baptists historically believed that only "particular" people could be saved. Others countered that the gospel message is for everyone.

While there is a biblical notion of predestination, Wade said Calvinists went wrong when they said God chooses some to be condemned. "Any doctrine that cuts people out of God's call . I don't know what you are, but you're not a Baptist like I am."

Wade said Baptists believe the Bible, but so do others.

"It's a terrible thing to accuse someone of not believing the Bible when they do," he said. "That's a slanderous thing."

Wade said a woman who heard he was coming to Missouri asked him if he believes the Bible because she had heard others say he doesn't. He said he told her what he told SBC seminary presidents in a recent meeting.

"I looked at the brothers and said, 'You know, it is possible for me to disagree with you and still agree with God.'"

"I said I'll sign every page of the Bible, but I'm not signing anybody's creed."

"We believe in this book," Wade said, noting that Mormons and Muslims both have a book they claim is a special revelation from God.

"Our book is better than that," he said. "You know what makes our book the greatest book ever written? Because it's about Jesus."

"Before there was ever a book called Exodus, there was an exodus. Before there was a written Gospel, there was a gospel lived by Jesus."

Wade said Baptists also stand for democratic church governance and autonomy of local churches.

"Preacher, you're not the head of the church, I'm sorry to break it to you," he said. "But neither are the deacons, the oldest member or the one who gives the most money. That job is already taken. Jesus is the head of the church."

Wade said it's often complained that Baptist polity allows churches "to do anything they want," and that's sometimes true. But he said Baptists in their decisions are supposed not to seek their own will but to discern what Christ would want them to do.

"We don't need a hierarchical person sitting up there telling us what to do," he said. "I'm not saying we don't need leaders. There's only one thing worse than a dictator and that's a pastor who won't lead. But remember, you're the undershepherd."

Baptists also affirm, "The believer has direct access to God," Wade said.

"You act on your call and the church has the right to confirm your call. If they think God calls you, they'll license you. Sooner or later they'll ordain you. That's the way it works, but they're no Sanhedrin."

"When it's all said and done, dear people, the only faith he wants is a free faith."

## Texas journalist accepts ABP freedom award

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- Associated Baptist Press honored longtime Fort Worth Star-Telegram Jim Jones for a "lifetime commitment to quality journalism and a free press," at an April 12 banquet in Jacksonville, Fla.

"Jim always presented the news in an understandable, insightful way," said ABP Executive Editor Greg Warner. "He's been an unfailing advocate for fair and objective reporting and religious freedom."

Warner and ABP board chairwoman Rebecca Wiggs presented Jones with the 2001 Religious Freedom Award, which honors individuals who have made unique contributions to religious freedom, particularly in the field of journalism. The presentation was originally scheduled for last fall but was postponed due to travel restrictions after Sept. 11.

"To be honored by ABP is special, because I respect this organization so highly for your effort to report the news without fear or favor," Jones said in accepting the award.

"We as journalists can have a role in promoting religious freedom, because we report on so many different faiths," Jones said. "At our best we are fair and accurate in our reporting."

Jones, who has covered Southern Baptists since the 1960s, said he was impressed with the "professionalism of the people who were at Baptist Press," over the years.

Jones recalled that when BP's former news editor Dan Martin and director Al Shackleford were fired in 1990, Martin commented that "the powers that be wanted to put spin doctors in their place."

"This has happened to some extent," Jones said. "His prediction has come true."

In covering issues related to Southern Baptists' well-documented struggles, Jones said, "It's good to know a news organization like ABP is there to help me."

Jones said journalists employed by other denominations also face pressures in trying to provide candid and professional reporting.

Jones accepted the award "in the name of secular religion reporters . and denominational journalists who try to report the news without fear or favor despite much opposition."

Former longtime denominational leader Duke McCall also spoke at the meeting. The annual award is underwritten by a gift from the McCall Family Foundation.

"Freedom was historically the distinguishing mark of Baptists," McCall said. "It was our birthright."

McCall said he and his wife had committed to strengthening ABP by underwriting the annual freedom award. "I want to see this thing permanently affixed to the Associated Baptist Press," he said.

McCall recalled how as executive secretary of the SBC Executive Committee, his staff started Baptist Press as a way to forge a national identity for Southern Baptists, who at the time were largely segregated and isolated by region.

In the early days, McCall said, Baptist Press' aim was to get the same news and information to the whole denomination through a network of diverse, state-owned Baptist newspapers.

"We were trying to say, 'We are all part of a larger fellowship, and we want you to know about these other people,'" he said.

Even back then, McCall said, people recognized there was a danger that the news service might "become a house skill."

## **High-profile Baptist layman accused of molestation**

By Bob Allen

JACKSONVILLE, Fla. (ABP) -- A community leader in Jacksonville, Fla., and deacon at the city's First Baptist Church has been arrested and charged with lewd and lascivious molestation of a teenage boy.

Stephen Lee Edmonds, 44, resigned as president of the North Florida Builder's Association after his arrest on felony charges April 15.

The allegations involve a neighbor who is not a member of the church, but media reports highlighted Edmonds' ties to the 25,000-member church in downtown Jacksonville.

Jerry Vines, the church's senior pastor and former president of the Southern Baptist Convention, issued a statement April 18 saying he was "deeply saddened when I learned of the heartbreaking reports involving one of our 25,000 members."

Vines, who was out of town when news of the arrest first broke, said Edmonds had resigned as one of the church's 285 deacons and from all other leadership roles in the congregation.

"While I do not minimize or condone sinful behavior, I continue to pray for the family and all who have been hurt," Vines said. "We are all reminded that Jesus said he came to heal the brokenhearted."

Edmonds reportedly served as a director in the church's college department. Separate group discussions for male and female students were reportedly planned for the weekend, and deacons were called to a special meeting April 18.

The scandal hit amid numerous reports of molestation charges being made against priests in the Catholic Church, heightening media interest in the issue of church sexual abuse.

Edmonds got out of jail April 16 after posting a \$50,000 bond. His arrest came after a boy, who at the time was 15, said Edmonds touched him improperly twice in 2000. Edmonds also is accused of transmitting harmful material to a minor on a computer. Police confiscated two computers from his home.

Police said they were investigating two other molestation claims against Edmonds by minors, according to the Florida-Times Union.

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