

**"Margin to Mission: The Missouri Baptist Conference of the Deaf and Its Vital Role in
Missouri Baptist History"**

Amelia Bordean

1973 Ladue Rd. Jacksonville, IL 62650

217-370-7733

HLGU

Jacksonville Deaf Bible Church; Jonathan Bordean

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Before 1955, Deaf Baptists in Missouri sat in churches across the state, watching preachers speak words they could not hear, sing songs they could not follow, and say prayers they could not fully understand. In many churches, there were no interpreters, no visual aids, and many times, no acknowledgment that Deaf believers were even in the audience. For Deaf people, Sunday mornings were not moments of spiritual refreshment—they were silent struggles. Their faith in Christ was genuine, but worship was lonely. The church, a place for fellowship and unity among believers, became a place where Deaf people often felt alone. With no access to preaching in their language or Deaf-led leadership, they lacked not only understanding, but the opportunity to contribute, to serve, and to be fully understood within their spiritual communities.

Out of this longing and quiet struggle, the Missouri Baptist Conference of the Deaf (MBCD) was born. Founded by Deaf Baptists in 1955, the conference became more than just an annual event—it became a movement. The conference created a space where Deaf Missourians could worship in their heart language, American Sign Language (ASL), as well as be fed spiritually by those who understood not only their language but culture and experiences. Over the years, it has created a space for Deaf leadership to be fostered. It has developed a sense of belonging among Deaf believers and challenged the Missouri Baptist churches to take inclusion seriously.

The Missouri Baptist Conference of the Deaf is a beautiful but often overlooked chapter in Missouri Baptist history. It shows how the Missouri Baptist church's commitment to community, Deaf leadership, and inclusive ministry influenced not only the spiritual lives of Deaf individuals but also expanded the broader mission of the Missouri Baptist Convention.

When Baptist congregations in the area started coming together in the early 1800s to pool resources and advance missions, carrying out the Great Commission, the Missouri Baptist

Convention (MBC) was born (“Vision & Mission”). Missouri Baptists were well-known from the beginning for placing a high priority on education, church planting, and evangelism. The convention's outreach strategy grew along with the state's population, starting with rural areas, then urban areas, and ultimately a variety of demographics, including immigrants, African Americans, and individuals with disabilities throughout the state of Missouri (“Missouri Baptist Convention Formed around Faith”). However, one community remained largely underserved for over a century: the Deaf.

While the Missouri Baptist Conference of the Deaf was not the first cooperative effort by the churches and Deaf leaders in Missouri, it was the first gathering that lasted (Joslin 8). According to the book, “Fifty Years of Encouragement: A History of the Missouri Baptist Conference of the Deaf,” George B. Joslin discusses in depth how the MBCD was established. In 1955, a group of Deaf Baptists took it upon themselves to organize the first Missouri Baptist Conference of the Deaf. It is important to note that the name includes “of the Deaf,” not “for the Deaf.” It was begun by Deaf people, for Deaf people (8). This step marked a turning point in Missouri Baptist history, not only supporting the Deaf in creating a place of their own to connect and fellowship with like-minded people but also challenging the broader convention to rethink what inclusion could—and should—look like.

The MBCD had communication and connections within the Missouri Baptist Convention, but it was not until 1958 that the two organizations began a “formal working relationship” (8). The Deaf people who came up with the idea to start this conference were from Baptist churches in Missouri. The two organizations strengthened, encouraged, and grew each other. While the MBCD was not directly under the MBC, we know that without the ministry and mission focus of the MBC and the support of the churches within the conference, the MBCD would not be as

strong. The partnership and relationship that they had resulted in stronger Deaf ministries and many new ministries (9).

The first meeting of the Missouri Baptist Convention of the Deaf was held at Blue Valley Park, Kansas City, Missouri on August 21, 1955 (Joslin 15). The secretary of the convention, Mrs. Annetta Anderson, created a document describing the first meeting. The songs were sung by Mrs. Bell, Mr. Bridgeford, and Mrs. Anderson (Anderson). Rev. Gunn brought the message of the day to the 59 people in attendance (Anderson). In the business meeting which followed the program the following officers were elected to serve a term of one year: President - Mrs. Ruth Brummitt; Vice Pres - Mrs. Lillie Maddox; Sec & Treas. Mrs. Annetta Anderson; 3 Trustees - Mrs. Harvey, Don Brummitt, and Lloyd Looney (Anderson). An offering was taken in the amount of \$6.84 and it was voted this money be given to help in a Deaf film (Anderson). After the meeting adjourned a group picture was taken.

In a handwritten letter to Dr. Earl Harding, Executive Secretary of the Missouri Baptist Convention, Ruth Brummitt wrote about how she was one of the Deaf individuals who started the conference. In that letter, she explains how she started the MBCD shortly after returning from Houston, Texas, where she attended the Southern Baptist Conference of the Deaf (SBCD) in June 1955 (Brummitt). She explained how it was such an inspiration that she felt like if Missouri had a state conference, it would help the churches for the Deaf and Deaf individuals grow (Brummitt). Because of the impact the SBCD had on Mrs. Brummitt, she was then led to start something similar in her own state. This speaks to the impact Deaf conferences can have on a Deaf individual.

As the years went on, the MBCD grew not only in attendees but also in ministries. In the second year of the conference, there were over 100 people present (Brummitt). They also created

a Constitution and Bylaws to establish a statement of purpose that year (Joslin 17). From then on, the conference just grew tremendously in ministry. MBCD began hosting camps for both the youth and for families along with interpreter conferences (20) These events provided so much encouragement to the members of the MBCD. It gave members the ability to serve within their community and minister to the individuals who attended the camps and interpreter conferences. In addition to these ministries, Missouri also took on a missionary to the Deaf, Roy Cissna (20). In response to the requests from the MBCD and the MBC, Roy Cissna resigned from the Home Mission Board and became a missionary with the MBC (20). Cissna went on to run the interpreter training as well as missionary training at Gallaudet University, the number one university for deaf people in the world (27).

Encouraged by MBCD and led by the Holy Spirit, churches in Missouri began new deaf ministries and developed others (32). Roy Cissna began publishing a newsletter called “Signs.” This newsletter continued monthly for most of the time Cissna worked with Missouri Baptist Deaf ministries (24). This newsletter encouraged the churches with new deaf ministries and carried news of new and exciting events and growth from each new ministry. As the years and decades went on, the deaf ministries and churches grew and changed. The MBCD continued to encourage and support these ministries, however, they did not meet from 1966 to 1976 (44). No one factor that caused the MBCD to suspend meetings for a decade. Some speculate that there were financial troubles within the conference. However, we do know that there was a “reviving” of the MBCD to resume support for the churches in 1975 (50). Because of the supposed financial struggles, the annual meetings from 1975 until 1982 were sponsored by the MBC, however, the planning was done by the deaf leaders.

In the years following the “reviving” of the MBCD, they resumed missions work, youth camps, and interpreter training. In 1997, George Joslin, a key Deaf leader and historian, served for one year as president of the conference, and with the help of other officers, consultants, and Mauricio Vargas, a multicultural and deaf missionary from the MBC, it was a successful year (96). Over 100 people attended that year’s meeting (97)! The MBCD was also able to provide the funds for interpreters at the 2004 MBC meeting (111). Then they celebrated the fiftieth anniversary of the MBCD in 2005.

While the MBC eventually became a strong resource for the Deaf community, the journey to a cordial and mutually supportive relationship wasn’t always smooth. One of the most notable points of tension occurred when MBC appointed missionary Roy Cissna to serve with Deaf ministries. Though well-intentioned, Cissna’s relationship with some Deaf individuals was complicated. According to George B. Joslin, many in the Deaf community felt that Cissna did not fully understand Deaf culture and often approached ministry from a top-down, hearing-centric perspective. Joslin wrote that Deaf Baptists “struggled to be seen not as a mission field, but as ministry partners,” and at times felt that Cissna’s methods limited their autonomy (34). The Deaf community wanted not just access to worship—they wanted leadership in it. This cultural disconnect made working together difficult sometimes, though Cissna’s efforts did help lay a foundation for future missionaries.

Despite these early struggles, the Missouri Baptist Convention increasingly came to recognize the value and vitality of MBCD. In the 1980s and 1990s, the MBC began providing financial support that allowed the MBCD to host annual conferences, print materials, and expand Deaf-led worship opportunities (19). This support enabled the MBCD to grow into a structured, sustainable ministry. According to *The Pathway*, the MBC’s financial assistance was essential

for events like the 2005 50th anniversary conference, which drew participants from across the state (“Missouri Baptist Conference of the Deaf Continues to Grow”).

In time, the relationship evolved into one of mutual respect. Mauricio Vargas, who succeeded Cissna in the late 1980s, worked closely with Deaf leaders and emphasized empowering Deaf people, rather than overlooking them. In *The Pathway*, Vargas said, “They make the decisions. They plan their programs. We work in harmony,” underscoring the shift in MBC’s approach from leadership over the Deaf to ministry with the Deaf (“Missouri Baptist Conference of the Deaf Continues to Grow”). While the journey wasn’t perfect, the combination of Deaf leadership and the MBC’s support created space for lasting spiritual impact.

For decades, Deaf Missourians sat in silence in their own churches, longing not just to hear the gospel, but to be a part of it. The creation of the Missouri Baptist Conference of the Deaf in 1955 marked a movement started by Deaf believers who dreamed of a church family that fully included them. Their perseverance created lasting change not only for themselves but for the entire Missouri Baptist community.

The Missouri Baptist Conference of the Deaf is far more than a side ministry or annual event; it is a very important part of Missouri Baptist history. It formed in response to a gap in spiritual care, gave birth to Deaf leadership, and challenged the MBC to live out the values of their convention. Through the often-complicated partnership between the MBCD and the Missouri Baptist Convention—including moments of misunderstanding with missionaries like Roy Cissna, and growth through supportive leaders like Mauricio Vargas—the two organizations found ways to work together. Financial support, collaborative ministry, and deepening mutual respect helped move the MBCD from margin to mission.

Early Missouri deaf ministry and church history is MBCD history. The MBCD existed to encourage the deaf ministries and support their efforts in bringing the gospel to Deaf Missourians. The story of the MBCD is ultimately a story of Deaf believers refusing to be overlooked, and a church learning—slowly, but surely—how to hear, see, and uplift them. It reminds us that true Christian fellowship means creating space where every voice, including the silent ones, can be heard.

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