

# Baylor regents unanimously elect Lilley president

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Baylor University President-elect John Lilley responds to reporters questions at a news conference following his unanimous election. Looking on are his wife, Gerrie, and Regents Chairman Will Davis. (Photo by Robert Rogers/Baylor University)

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**By Marv Knox & Ken Camp**

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WACO-Baylor University regents unanimously elected John Lilley, president of the University of Nevada at Reno, as the Texas Baptist university's 13th president on a first ballot following the unanimous recommendation of an 11-member regents presidential search committee.

Lilley, 66, is a consensus builder who impressed the regents with his collaborative approach to leadership and love for Baylor, Regents Chair Will Davis said. He takes office Jan. 2, succeeding Robert Sloan, who became university chancellor June 1.

He earned three degrees from Baylor, and in January, the Baylor Alumni Association awarded him its Distinguished Alumni Award—the organization's highest honor.

Lilley—the son of a Louisiana Baptist pastor—is a licensed Baptist minister who served as a minister of music during his student years.

Although he has been an ordained ruling elder in Presbyterian churches in recent years, Lilley and his wife, Gerrie, said they looked forward to “coming home” and rejoining First Baptist Church in Waco.

“I've always told my Presbyterian pastors, 'I may be joining your church, but I'm a Baptist,'” Lilley said, noting that distinctive Baptist principles were life-shaping beliefs “learned at my father's knee.”

Lilley described Baylor as “the crown jewel of Texas Baptists” and said he looked forward to a strong relationship with the Baptist General

Convention of Texas. Given the choice between traveling to Washington, D.C., to participate in Baylor's bid to obtain the George W. Bush Presidential Library or going to the BGCT annual meeting in Austin, Lilley said he chose to meet with Texas Baptists, noting the library presentation was in good hands.

Lilley acknowledged this move at this point in his career is something he would do "only for Baylor."

The president-elect showed emotion when he recalled leaving a small-town Louisiana Baptist pastor's home to study at Baylor in the late 1950s.

"The atmosphere I experienced—in the classroom and out of the classroom and at First Baptist Church here in Waco—that was a transformative experience for me," he said.

And the opportunity to come back to Baylor is a special privilege, Lilley added. "To be president of a place where you can give full expression to your faith, where its naturalness is unleashed, already it is a great joy."

Fielding questions from reporters in a news conference and in an interview, Lilley faced the issues that have divided the "Baylor family" in the past few years, as well as specifics about how he will serve the school that has a long history as a Texas Baptist institution but also designs on prominence far beyond the Lone Star State.

Baylor regents, faculty, alumni and students have been divided over the future of the university, primarily the leadership of former President Sloan.

Baylor 2012, the school's 10-year vision to make it a top-tier university with a distinctively Christian character, has been the flashpoint of controversy.

Among other issues, 2012 has raised questions regarding the appropriate balance of faith and learning, and it has pitted faculty against each other,

with long-term teachers who excelled in the classroom against newer scholars whose emphasis is on research.

Mending the rift will require “big ears,” Lilley said. “There needs to be lots of talk, lots of conversations. ... My sense is that everyone, No. 1, loves this university and wants it to grow and prosper as a Baptist institution and also as a top-tier institution.”

Excelling in academics and holding fast to Baylor's reputation as a Christian university in the Baptist tradition will require balance and touch, he said. And it means recognizing constituents within the Baylor community will disagree—“as Baptists do,” he added.

Lilley noted he has studied Baylor 2012 and will seek to lead Baylor to fulfill its aims.

“Its fundamental premise is that Christian universities in the Baptist tradition ... will remain so through great effort,” he said, acknowledging many universities founded by churches and denominations have cast off their mantles of faith as they have sought academic prominence. “It's very easy to lose that focus (on faith). Our question is: Can we maintain and enhance it?”

In recent years, Baylor's constituencies have argued about how to balance faith and learning—its legacy as a Baptist Christian university as well as its desire to be respected for its academics, he said, but he delineated the terms of the disagreement. “Baylor has had a spirited debate about how to do it, ... but agreement that it should be done.”

In recent years, the Baylor community not only has sought to handle the faith-and-learning debate, but also to grapple with the classroom-versus-research debate.

“To take on either of those issues simultaneously is a huge undertaking,”

he admitted.

Penn State University at Erie, which he led for 21 years, shifted from being a school noted for its classroom teaching to a research university during his administration.

While long-term teaching faculty can feel diminished when new research professors arrive, the transition can be made sympathetically, he said, noting the important factor is everyone is valued.

A school like Baylor can honor and affirm excellent classroom teachers while progressing in research, he said, adding teaching is central and scholarship is crucial.

Resolving the faith-and-learning debate is even more difficult, Lilley said.

“We must find a way to be intentional about Baylor's faith,” he stressed, noting Baylor 2012's emphasis on this is appropriate but not easy.

“We have to figure out how to balance this,” he added. “The only way to deal with this is to talk it through. I can't resolve it, but I think I can create an environment where reasonable people can come together and work this out.”

Asked if he would be a unifier who could bring reconciliation to Baylor, Lilley said: “That's every president's wish. Every president wants to have an intellectual community that pulls together. ... Spirit, trust and fellowship are very important.”

Underscoring his sense that Baylor's relationship with the BGCT is vital, Lilley said he would be a Texas Baptist within two days, when he and his wife would join First Baptist Church in Waco, where he was a member when he was a student at Baylor. He also intends to attend church with every member of the Baylor board of regents.

“Baylor has been the crown jewel of Texas Baptists—and it still is,” he said. “The relationship is very important. I will do everything I can to strengthen that relationship.”

Although Lilley has not been a member of a Baptist church for much of his adult life, “I was raised a Baptist and always have been a Baptist,” he said.

His father, Ernest Lilley, was a longtime Baptist pastor in Louisiana, and his mother, Sibyl, was a schoolteacher and strong Christian influence.

“My father led me to Christ at age 6,” he recalled, noting some people may question whether he was too young to make such a commitment. “Having been raised as I was raised, it was authentic.”

From his father, Lilley learned bedrock Baptist principles, he said. “Eternal salvation by faith, not of works; immersion; soul freedom; priesthood of the believer—all those things I learned at my father's knee. ... Faith has been a great part of my life.”

In recent years, he has attended Presbyterian churches, primarily because of worship, he said.

“Music is at the core” of worship for him, he explained. “I grew up on a bit of rock 'n roll, but I want to have that organ.”

Outside the South, he has not found Baptist churches that provide the kind of worship that touches him spiritually, he added. “Not that there aren't Baptist churches (in the communities where he has lived), and I certainly don't condemn them. But, simply speaking, (contemporary worship) doesn't speak to me.”

So, he and his family have been members of large, downtown churches that engage in worship with organs and choirs and stirring preaching, he said.

Lilley majored in music at Baylor, earning bachelor's degrees in 1961 and

1962 and a master of music degree in 1964. He earned his doctorate in music at the University of Southern California in 1971.

Lilley became the University of Nevada at Reno's president in April 2001 after 21 years leading Penn State at Erie. He began his academic career as a faculty member at the Claremont Colleges in California. In 1976, he was named assistant dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Kansas State University.

He and his wife, Gerrie, have four grown children and three grandchildren.

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