

John Lilley seeks balance as he leads Baylor University

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By Ken Camp

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WACO—Baylor University bills itself as “a Christian university in the historic Baptist tradition.” And when President John Lilley uses the phrase, he emphasizes every key word.

John Lilley

“It’s not in just any tradition and not even just any Baptist tradition. It’s the historic Baptist tradition,” he said, stressing the university’s leaders hold a distinctively Baptist understanding of religious liberty and noncreedal, biblical faith.

“In a Christian university, it re-quires balance” he said, touching on a favorite theme. “A Christian university is not a place where you park your brain at the door. We want to help students fully develop their potential—great hearts and great minds.”

Less than two months into his presidency, Lilley sees balance as a key

governing principle—particularly in dealing with polarized constituencies within “the Baylor family.”

“Serious talk” and vibrant debate about important ideas should flourish on a Baptist university campus, Lilley said. He wants to create a climate of mutual respect and trust, where those conversations can occur.

“If we raise our spirits and lower our volume, that’s when we’ll really hear each other,” he said. “How we treat each other is important.

“Atmosphere matters. ... If we treat each other badly in God’s name, shame on us.”

Lilley recognizes debate about how to achieve the integration of faith and learning led to misunderstandings and mistrust over the last several years.

“In some disciplines, the integration of faith and learning will be intensive. In some, it will be less intensive. But we’re going to be intentional about it,” he said.

Consequently, Lilley has instructed all academic departments to submit by March 1 a self-assessment of how they plan to advance Baylor’s commitment to being a Christian university.

As the school strives to integrate Christian faith into both classroom instruction and campus life, Lilley believes that goal can be achieved best with “a lighter touch” and a clear understanding that the administration is not seeking uniformity.

“We don’t sit over here at Pat Neff (administration building) and issue edicts,” he said.

Intentionality and a “lighter touch” also will guide faculty hiring practices—another hot topic at Baylor in recent years, Lilley said.

“Our intention is to communicate that Christianity matters as we talk to candidates. We want to help them see how they can fit in with the mission of Baylor University. We can do that through conversation—getting to know one another and learning about their faith journey,” he said, adding Interim Provost Randall O’Brien will conduct the interviews.

“It’s an intentional approach but not inquisitorial or confrontational. We’ll find out all we need to know. And through the process, even if candidates are not chosen, we hope we will have made friends for Baylor.”

Lilley emphasizes he sees the Baylor presidency as “a sacred trust” and “a calling,” and he expressed appreciation for the ongoing support Texas Baptists offer the university.

“Baylor is a special place, and it’s special to Texas Baptists,” he said.

In his first weeks on the job, he has met with numerous Texas Baptist groups—as well as faculty, staff, retired faculty and alumni. O’Brien sees Lilley leading by example as he seeks to unite Baylor’s varied constituencies.

“It’s therapeutic the way Dr. Lilley has come in here listening and come in caring,” O’Brien said. “He’s met with every group who wanted to meet with him, (and) they’ve found him warm and welcoming. He’s modeling what he’s calling for.”

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