

Baylor disunity leads to Lilley's firing

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GRAPEVINE—Baylor University President John Lilley has been fired for failing to “bring the Baylor family together,” reported Howard Batson, chairman of the university’s board of regents.

Regents voted to remove Lilley from office, effective immediately, during their summer meeting July 24. The vote was taken by secret ballot, and the vote total was not announced to the board, Batson said.

Batson cited Lilley’s inability to unite Baylor’s various constituencies at least nine times in a 20-minute national teleconference with reporters and several times in an interview with the *Baptist Standard* shortly after the regents’ vote.



Lilley [became Baylor's president](#) in January 2006, at a time when Baylor’s constituency had divided over the administration of the previous president, Robert Sloan, and particularly Baylor 2012, a decade-long strategy plan.

For two and half years, Lilley worked to strengthen Baylor but could not foster unity, Batson said.

"Baylor needs a new president"

“The board really thinks Baylor needs a new president who can bring together and unify the various constituencies of the university,” he said. “We felt like Dr. Lilley came at a very difficult time in the history of Baylor, and we acknowledge that. We do appreciate his service a great deal.”

Lilley could have stayed longer—possibly until his contract ends in 2010—if he had agreed to participate in a transitional process, Batson said.

Under terms of the proposed transition, Batson would have been authorized to appoint a presidential search committee “sometime before the end of 2008,” he said. Lilley would have remained in office until his successor was selected.

“This could take from months to years,” Batson noted. “With John in place, we could take more time to do a thorough search. We probably saw John serving out much, if not all, of his contract. But he didn’t want to do it under those terms. ...

“The reality was we felt unless he was willing to transition, he would not have the support of various constituents of the Baptist family and move the university in the successful way it is moving. ...

“He didn’t want to work under those conditions. The board felt it could have worked very well, but he did not, and we respect his reasons.”

Tensions with faculty

Although tensions with faculty flared this spring, when Lilley’s administration initially denied tenure to 12 of 30 faculty candidates, Batson said no single factor led to the regents’ decision to dismiss him.

“There’s no denying we had the tenure situation ... and the branding situation (Lilley’s initial decision to get rid of the popular “interlocking BU” logo). Perhaps the process was not as swift as some of us had hoped in bringing the Baylor family together,” he said. “I don’t know that there was any one particular relationship that caused the difficulty. ... We did not see the Baylor family coming together as we envisioned.”

In an e-mailed statement, Lilley expressed his disagreement with the

regents' decision.

"Two and a half years ago, I was invited unanimously by the board of regents to come to Baylor," Lilley said. "I did not come to Baylor to advance my career. Gerrie (his wife) and I were reluctant but finally were persuaded to come because of the unanimous vote and the promised prayers of the regents.

"We felt that we could help to heal the wounded hearts left in the wake of the conflict that preceded us. Despite the board's unanimous vote, it became clear immediately that the Baylor board of regents reflected some of the deepest divisions in the Baylor family."

Lilley expressed satisfaction with the work he and his team accomplished during his tenure.

Lilley proud of work, accomplishments

"I am proud of the work my colleagues and I have done to bring the Baylor family together and to help the university achieve the ambitious goals set forth in our mission and vision 2012, documented in our annual report just presented to the regents," he said.

"I deeply regret the action of the board, and I do not believe that it reflects the best interests of Baylor University."

In both interviews, Batson affirmed what he called Lilley's "significant accomplishments" achieved during the past two and a half years. They included:

- *Baylor's highest-ever ranking by U.S. News & World Report—75th—among national doctoral-granting universities, an increase of six places.*
- *Attracting a "large and diverse student body," including last fall's*

enrollment of 14,174, the university's second-highest total.

- Record endowment, "now crossing the billion-dollar mark."*
- A record 402 students enrolled in Baylor's Truett Theological Seminary, including "more students interested in ministering in the local church."*
- Athletic successes, including the men's basketball team's return to the NCAA tournament, the women's basketball team's continual appearance in the tournament, men's and women's tennis teams' Big 12 championships and anticipation of an exciting football season under a new head coach, Art Briles.*
- Classification as a university with "highest research activity" by the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching.*
- Extensive construction on campus, including the \$42 million Brooks Village residential center and the \$30 million football training/practice complex.*

"John has left Baylor better than he found it. John had a passion for the research element of (Baylor) 2012," Batson said. "We are appreciative of his service and love for the university."

Cunningham named acting president

The regents selected one of their own, Harold Cunningham, as acting president with "full authority" to lead until an interim president is chosen, Batson said.

Cunningham is immediate past chairman of the Baylor regents and served as Baylor vice president twice—for special projects and for finance and administration.

“Harold has a track record of proven leadership and is well respected within the Baylor family,” Batson said. “Harold is the perfect person to do this.”

Acting president is not the same thing as interim president, Batson stressed, noting the regents will begin a process to designate the interim president. That person will not be a candidate for the presidency, he pledged.

After the interim is chosen, the regents will begin a search for the next president, he said.

Despite Lilley’s firing and his predecessor’s departure under a cloud of controversy, the regents do not expect difficulty “drawing top talent to Baylor,” Batson said, noting, “We will be open-minded and do an international search.”

The regents want someone with strong leadership skills and academic background, as well as ability to build consensus, he said.

Next president must be a "unifier"

“We want a unifier of the Baylor family; that’s always a good thing,” he said, adding, “Connections to the Baptist family are a must.”

“The largest mandate is we need a new president who will listen to all the voices of the Baylor family and bring us together under the vision of 2012,” Batson said.

A reporter noted many people think the regents themselves—or at least some of the regents—are a significant part of the ongoing conflict at Baylor and asked Batson what the regents will do to restore trust among the “Baylor family.”

“Actually, I think the board of regents is more unified than I’ve seen it in a

long time,” Batson said. “We may not agree about every motion, but I see the board functioning in a healthy fashion. ... At the end of the day, we can walk out of our meetings as a unified, functioning board.”

Lilley’s “dedication and service to Baylor” are appreciated, said Jeff Kilgore, vice president and CEO of the Baylor Alumni Association. “He is a distinguished alumni and will always have a home with his alumni association.”

Lilley inherited a “highly sensitive and emotionally charged campus—and alumni/donor base—probably without being fully equipped with an adequate understanding of our experience in Baylor’s recent history,” Kilgore observed. “Having been away so long, I’m sure it would have been extremely difficult on anyone to get an in-depth understanding of the Baylor family and its unique structure. ...”

“While John made himself very accessible to many of the various constituent groups, he often remained vigilant to his own opinions,” Kilgore added. “In a delicate time such as this for Baylor, it is not only important to reach out for input, but for that input to have impact on decisions and the direction Baylor heads.

Inclusiveness and "collective buy-in" key

“It’s become evident how essential inclusiveness and collective buy-in are to the success of a private academic institution and alumni relations.”

Kilgore noted Lilly was “the single conduit of information between regents, faculty and alumni,” adding that task “probably proved to be too much for any one person and probably not the most effective model moving Baylor forward.”

Although the alumni association often has been at odds with the regents in recent years, Kilgore extended an olive branch.

“We understand what a difficult and critical process it is to determine the university’s leadership and to take measures to move Baylor forward, and our association of alumni and donors stands ready to provide support in any possible way,” he said. “Our regents are entrusted with much, and we are all looking toward their leadership and a process that fosters inclusion and input from faculty, staff, alumni and other constituent groups.

“That input across the family is always welcomed and appreciated during times such as these.”

Baylor is one of nine universities affiliated with the Baptist General Convention of Texas and one of 27 BGCT agencies and institutions overall.

Pride and grief

One of Lilley’s fellow institutional leaders, Ken Hall of Buckner International, expressed both pride and grief regarding Baylor.

“Baylor overall is a great university,” Hall said. “I’m particularly proud of the university as it is today. As a Texas Baptist, I’m very proud. But I’m also extremely grieved that, for the past several years at the board and the highest levels of administration, there continues to be disunity.”

Hall noted he does not know the specific facts of the regents’ decision to fire Lilley but said he is praying for “this great flagship ministry of our Baptist General Convention of Texas.”

“I am personally praying that during this time of transition, the current leadership—both volunteers and paid leaders—and the various constituencies will find in their hearts a way to get together and represent what it truly means to be a Christian university.

“They need to genuinely present a Christian approach to divisiveness and difficulty. We see it in our churches, our denomination and in our

institutions too often. We're not representing our Lord best when people see us fighting."

Matt Cordon, a Baylor Law School professor and president of the Faculty Senate, could not be reached for comment.