

Q conference seeks to present different face of evangelical activism

by [Yonat Shimron](#)

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c. 2012 Religion News Service (RNS) Gabe Lyons thinks Christian culture warriors are on the wrong path.

His sixth annual Q Conference, which opens Tuesday (April 10) in Washington, D.C., is an attempt to do things differently. With 700 participants gathered in a stately downtown auditorium, Lyons will play host to a distinct kind of Christian conference, one that seeks a respectful, constructive conversation on a host of issues confronting the nation.

Q, which stands for "question," will allow 30 different culture leaders -- from New York Times columnist David Brooks to Florida megachurch pastor Joel Hunter -- to present their ideas for the common good during a two-and-a-half day confab.

"We feel we have a role to play in renewing the culture and holding back the effects of sin," said Lyons, founder of Q, a nonprofit organization based in New York City. "We're not to do it in an antagonistic way. We hope to do it in a hopeful way that gives witness to the rest of the world in how things ought to be."

Part Clinton Global Initiative, part TED Talk, the conference is designed to highlight the best ideas rather than condemning the nation's ills. Presenters are allocated three, nine, or 18 minutes to talk. Participants sit at round tables instead of rows, and time is built in for participants to reflect and talk about what they've heard.

That kind of format allows Q to include both Richard Land from the religious right and Jim Wallis from the religious left; both will share the stage Tuesday to discuss areas of potential agreement.

Lyons, a Liberty University graduate, said he realized nine years ago how little most Americans respected Christianity. That realization prompted him to acknowledge that the nation's religious pluralism was here to stay, and that if Christians wanted

their views to be given a thoughtful hearing, they had better quit resisting and start creating a culture that allows God's love to break through.

His 2010 book, "The Next Christians: The Good News About the End of Christian America," was a kind of manifesto calling Christians to quit cursing the darkness and start lighting a candle.

Land, who heads the Southern Baptist Convention's Ethics and Religious Liberty Commission, said he appreciates Lyons's point, but thought it was overly simplistic. "Jesus called us to do both; He called us to be salt and light," Land said. "We can walk and chew gum at the same time."

Land said his own denomination, which is often cast as a judgmental culture agitator, is also among the nation's largest providers of emergency disaster relief. In addition, its members give a higher proportion of their incomes to charity.

But Q participants are not about to compromise their evangelical convictions. On Thursday, participants will fan out across Washington to press Congress, the White House and the State Department on issues they deem important.

The difference, Lyons said, is the tone.

"It's more civil, less fear-based," he said. "There's more appreciation for the intellect and a commitment to let the best ideas win out."

(The Q Conference will provide a free video stream of its opening day sessions from 9 a.m. to 10:30 a.m. and from 7 p.m. to 8:45 p.m. at <http://www.qideas.org/live/>)