

Compromise: In matters political and ecclesial

by [John Buchanan](#) in the [January 12, 2010](#) issue

By the time this issue of the magazine is in your hands, the fate of health-care reform may have been decided by Congress. The legislative process, like the proverbial production of sausage, is not neat or pretty. If a bill passes, it will not be all the Obama administration hoped for and it will be a lot more than the Republican opposition wants.

Churchpeople have had a devilish time trying to reach a compromise on controversial issues such as whether gays and lesbians may be ordained ministers. For many there seems to be little if any room for maneuvering. The Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) spent two years coming up with a Peace, Unity and Purity policy that would allow some individuals and governing bodies the possibility of diverging from national policies. I hoped that it would offer a way to live together with our different views, but it appears not to be working. Each side is gearing up for another battle on the provisions. Many people think it is time to acknowledge our conflicts as irresolvable and divide into two smaller, more ideologically pure bodies. Division is the way our church has resolved conflicts in the past. Presbyterians have made schism an art form.

Schism is not an option for Congress. It took a very bloody civil war and a half million deaths to make that point in the 1860s. So the process of health-care reform will stumble and lurch along.

In *The New Yorker* (Dec. 7) Jill Lepore quoted Yale economist Irving Fisher: "At present the United States has the unenviable distinction of being the only great industrial nation without compulsory health insurance." Fisher made that remark in 1916.

Lepore also quoted Congresswoman Shirley Jackson-Lee, who observed that it was funny to call this current effort at reform "rushed." "America has been working on providing access to health care for all Americans since the nineteen-thirties, forties,

fifties, sixties, seventies, eighties, and . . . nineties.” And, the nineteen-tens.

Health care for all is an issue of justice. It is part of the peace, security and wholeness—the shalom—that the Bible tells us is a sign of the reign of God. If a health-care reform bill passes, it will mean that some deeply convicted men and women found a way to compromise. Could it be that a bit of God’s kingdom would be realized via the art of compromise? If so, maybe churches should be paying attention.