

This is a printer friendly version of an article from the **The Greenville News**
To print this article open the file menu and choose Print.

[Back](#)

New Congress to usher in more religious diversity
Members include first Muslim, first two Buddhists

Published: Sunday, December 24, 2006 - 2:00 am

By Bill Theobald
GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

WASHINGTON -- Many Democrats talked openly during the fall campaign about their faith and how it influenced their policy positions in an overt attempt to counter the power of the religious right.

Now that they have won control of Congress, people can expect next year to see a new set of issues being presented with a religious spin.

Beyond that, the 535 members of the 110th Congress will be the most religiously diverse in history and includes the first Muslim and the first two Buddhists ever to serve.

Rep. Bob Inglis, R-Travelers Rest, believes newly elected Democrats who helped their party take control of the House are conservative in their religion and in their politics. Inglis said they would keep the agenda from going too far left.

Advertisement Inglis cited Heath Shuler, the former National Football League quarterback from western North Carolina, as an example of "a pro-life, pro-gun member of the Fellowship of Christian Athletes (who is) someone I would expect to have agreement with on a number of things."

However, Inglis, a churchgoing Presbyterian, believes Democrats will focus more on social justice issues such as helping the poor and protecting the environment. He does not think that's necessarily bad.

"Jesus had an awful lot to say about social justice," Inglis added.

If nothing else, Inglis said, the political diversity of religious members of Congress shows, "God doesn't sit on the Republican platform and God doesn't sit on the Democratic platform."


Rabbi Michael Lerner, who earlier this year helped launch the Network of Spiritual Progressives to counter the religious right, said he believes his network and other similar efforts likely contributed to Democrats' success. But he's skeptical of an immediate impact in Congress.

"I don't think (things) change that quickly," Lerner said. "It may mean that for some in Congress who want to end the war, there will be more willingness to draw on those theme, and similarly with respect to poverty."

Roman Catholics will again comprise the largest denomination represented in the next Congress, with 155 members, or 29 percent of the total, according to a breakdown compiled for the past three decades by Albert Menendez of Americans for Religious Liberty. Nationwide, 24.5 percent of residents are Catholic, according to the American Religious Identity Survey.

Next are Baptists, followed by Methodists, Presbyterians, Jews and Episcopalians.

The growth in recent decades in the number of Catholics, from around 100 to current levels, and in the

STORYCHAT 

What's your view?
[Click here](#) to add
your comment to
this story.

number of Mormons, from a half-dozen to 15, is one trend Menendez has tracked.

And of course there is the election to the House of the first Muslim, Keith Ellison of Minnesota, and Buddhist Reps. Mazie Hirono of Hawaii and Hank Johnson of Georgia.

"That kind of blows your mind, a Buddhist winning in Georgia," Menendez said. "Political culture is finally catching up with the diversity of our country."

Ellison is declining interviews until after he is sworn in, and Johnson won't discuss his faith.

Hirono was raised in Buddhist traditions but said she is not a practicing Buddhist. She said the Buddhist values of truth, wisdom and peace are part of what led her to public service.

But she is adamant that there should be a separation of church and state.

"I think that political leaders should not infuse religion as a central part of why they do anything," Hirono said. "When I serve, I do my best in terms of what is good for the community, what is just, what is fair."

The interplay between faith and politics also can be seen in the efforts of two Democrats -- Baptist Rep. Lincoln Davis of Tennessee and Catholic Rep. Tim Ryan of Ohio -- to reduce abortions. It's also an example of how Inglis -- who ticks off the names of several anti-abortion Democrats he knows -- thinks religious Democrats will differ from their more liberal colleagues.

Davis, who is anti-abortion, is proposing a package of social programs to support pregnant women, particularly poor women, as a way to cut the number of abortions. He also believes issues such as the minimum wage should be viewed in religious or moral terms and used by anti-abortion groups to judge a member's commitment to reducing abortions.

Ryan, also anti-abortion, is proposing a similar package of social programs but his legislation also calls for more funding for contraception, putting him odds with the leadership of the Catholic Church.

"It is a difficult to not be in complete agreement with the church, but I also have a public responsibility to reduce abortions," said Ryan, who received a letter from his diocese asking him to withdraw his legislation.

"They have their opinion and I have mine," he said.

GNS reporter Ellyn Ferguson contributed to this story.
