

Clergy urges blessing of same-sex couples

NEW YORK (AP) — Dramatizing the most divisive issue in American religion, 850 mostly liberal members of the clergy and other religious figures issued a declaration yesterday calling for all faiths to bless same-sex couples and allow openly gay ministers.

Among endorsers of the statement were the retired leader of the Episcopal Church, the presidents of the United Church of Christ and Unitarian Universalist Association, presidents of 15 Protestant seminaries, and numerous theologians.

The declaration got slim backing among Roman Catholics and none from any major Evangelical, black Protestant, Eastern Orthodox, Mormon, Buddhist, Hindu or Muslim organizations. Besides homosexuality, the paper advocates open access to abortion and sex education at all age levels. It opposes "unsustainable population growth," the "commercial exploitation of sexuality" and all forms of "sexual oppression."

"For too long the only voices in the public square on religion and

sexuality have been the anti-sexuality pronouncements of the religious right," Debra Haffner, president of the Sexuality Information and Education Council of the U.S., a secular organization, said.

A spokesperson for the Southern Baptist Convention, the Rev. William Merrell, said the declaration perpetuates a "radical departure from the teachings of the Scriptures."

"I do not believe that the moral confusion and the moral incoherence that characterizes the time is relieved by such statements. Rather it is made worse," Merrell said.

Added an Episcopal Church conservative, President Peter C. Moore of Trinity Episcopal School for Ministry in Ambridge, Pa.: "God loves homosexuals, as he loves us all. But I have yet to find any support based on Scripture, tradition or reason for the idea that God approves of homosexual behavior."

Members of 25 denominations signed the declaration, but nearly half were from four groups with liberal policies: the United Church, Unitarian Universalists and Judaism's Reform and Reconstructionist branches.

Clinton pushes gun control ideas

BOSTON (AP) — President Clinton appealed to Congress on Tuesday to begin the new century with a fresh slate on gun control, saying "common sense gun safety" should be the first item on this year's congressional agenda.

Clinton requested the lawmakers' support for a \$280 million package of new gun safety and enforcement programs that he will propose in his budget package.

And he asked that they "start this new century by abandoning another stale debate" about whether the government should enforce existing gun laws stronger or fight crime and prevent firearms accidents through new gun-control laws.

"The real answer is we should do both," Clinton said. His budget package, he said, was designed to send an unambiguous message to criminals: "If you commit crimes with guns or violate gun laws, you will pay a heavy price."

Clinton's usual nemesis on gun issues, the National Rifle Association, offered cautious support for the new enforcement tools Clinton is requesting.

Clinton wants 500 new Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco and Firearms agents and inspectors, plus 1,000 more prosecutors focusing on gun crime at all levels and a program to track guns through ballistics testing.

Calling an emphasis on increased enforcement and prosecution "long overdue," NRA spokesperson Jim Manown said the organization is ready to renew its fight against two new gun-control measures that collapsed in Congress last year.

"We certainly don't expect the Clinton-Gore administration to abandon their push for new restrictions on law-abiding gun owners," Manown said.

Clinton announced his gun proposal during a visit to a

spotless new gymnasium and community meeting hall in the Boston neighborhood of Roxbury, where reported crime was down more than 65 percent last year.

"The drop in the crime rate has been due both to changing laws and to better enforcement and better prevention," the president said.

Boston's homicide rate dropped to a 38-year low in 1999, thanks in part to a program that allied law enforcement, the clergy, community leaders and gang members against crime.

The Boston Pilot Project is credited with the homicide toll's plunge from 153 slayings in 1990 to 31 in 1999. A strong economy and declining use of crack cocaine also contributed to improved neighborhood security.

In addition to the gun plan Clinton announced Tuesday, the administration already has said it will ask for \$10 million to develop "smart guns" that fire only when held by their owners.

The White House also is trying to convince gun makers and gun dealers to agree to new safety rules, with the threat of a national lawsuit if the groups don't comply.

The White House hoped to win new, tougher laws in Congress last year, when national sentiment over gun violence ran high in the wake of high-profile shootings such as the teen massacre at Columbine High School in Colorado.

Clinton wanted to tighten rules on buying guns at swap-meet style gun shows and to require additional safety features on handguns and ban the importation of large-capacity ammunition clips.

A version the White House liked passed the Senate, with the tie-breaking vote cast by Vice President Al Gore.

Clinton said that vote represented a defeat for "the high-pressure tactics of the NRA," one of the most powerful and effective lobbies in Congress.



CLINTON

"If you commit crimes with guns or violate gun laws, you will pay a heavy price."

News in Brief

Reuters employees hold sick-out

NEW YORK (AP) — Most journalists in the New York office of Reuters, a major financial news provider, called in sick yesterday amid drawn-out negotiations with the company over job security.

The protest came just as major U.S. companies began reporting earnings for the fourth quarter of 1999, an especially busy time for business news companies.

Reuters spokesperson Bob

Cooke said 80 percent to 90 percent of the 120 journalists in New York called in sick. He said he was unsure how long the action would continue.

Nursing home files for bankruptcy

ATLANTA (AP) — The nation's second-largest nursing home operator filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy protection today, blaming federal cuts in Medicare reimbursement.

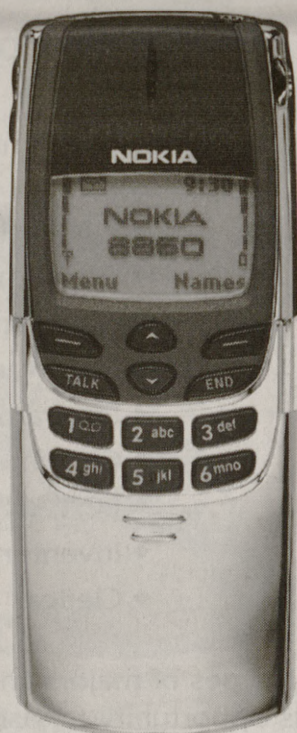
Atlanta-based Mariner Post-Acute Network, which runs more than 400

nursing homes nationwide, said it had secured \$150 million in debt financing from Chase Manhattan Bank and PNC Bank.

The company said the 1997 Balanced Budget Act had cut its Medicare reimbursement. It filed for protection in U.S. Bankruptcy Court in Wilmington, Del.

"The crisis in long-term care continues to grow as dramatic Medicare cuts, explosive litigation costs and staffing shortages threaten the viability of long-term care providers," Mariner chairperson Francis Cash said in a statement.

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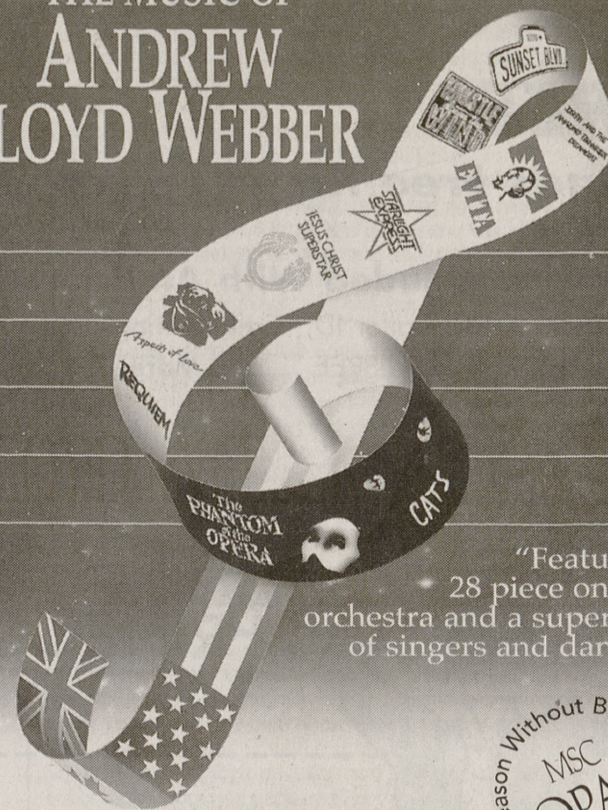
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