

CHRISTIAN CHURCHES CONSIDER UNITY PLAN

WASHINGTON (CNS) — A plan to foster a greater united Christian witness in the United States has been sent to 46 Christian church bodies for consideration.

The proposal for what is provisionally called Christian Churches Together in the U.S.A. outlines a vision for the most inclusive Christian organization ever in the United States, said a Feb. 28 news release from the U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops.

POPE'S ENVOY TO TALK WITH PRESIDENT BUSH

VATICAN CITY (CNS) — Pope John Paul II sent a personal envoy, Italian Cardinal Pio Laghi, to Washington to confer with President George W. Bush and press for a peaceful solution to the Iraqi crisis.

Cardinal Laghi, a former Vatican ambassador to the United States and a longtime friend of Bush's father, former President George H.W. Bush, was expected to arrive in Washington March 3.

FANS MOURN DEATH OF 'MISTER ROGERS' HOST

WASHINGTON (CNS) — Fans of children's television mourned the death of the Rev. Fred Rogers, the Presbyterian minister who became a fixture on PBS with his "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" series.

The Rev. Rogers died Feb. 27 of complications from stomach cancer. He was 74.

CUBAN CHURCH NEEDS FREEDOM TO PROGRESS

HAVANA (CNS) — For Cuba to progress, the Catholic Church needs greater freedom to influence society, and the government needs to relax its firm hold on the country, said Cardinal Jaime Ortega Alamino of Havana in a pastoral letter.

Economic, social, moral and political problems have produced despair, causing people to flee the country, he said.

The letter was made public Feb. 24 to commemorate the 150th anniversary of the death of Father Felix Varela, 19th-century advocate of Cuban independence from Spain. Father Varela lived much of his life in exile in the United States.

Activists hail court ruling

Racketeering law does not apply to abortion protesters

WASHINGTON (CNS) — The U.S. Supreme Court's Feb. 26 ruling that a federal racketeering law did not apply to abortion clinic protesters was praised as a protection for protesters of all sorts.

In the 8-1 ruling, the court said protesters cannot be prosecuted under the anti-racketeering law if the effect of their protest is only to impede an abortion clinic's business. It would take acquiring actual property to trigger the anti-racketeering law, the court said.

The ruling in two cases that were heard together — *Joseph Scheidler and the Pro-Life Action League v. the National Organization for Women* and *Operation Rescue v. NOW* — will protect protesters of all sorts from being prosecuted under the Racketeer Influenced and Corrupt Organizations Act of 1970, known as RICO.

Carol Crossed, a Brighton, N.Y., Catholic and a consistent-life-ethic activist, said the ruling was good news for anti-abortion and anti-war protesters. Crossed, who was on hand at the Supreme Court for the Dec. 4 arguments, said the pro-choice community lost because it went too far when it employed RICO — intended to target organized crime — against political protesters.

"To think that someone is involved in the anti-war movement, the pro-life movement, the suffragist movement, the homelessness movement and certainly the civil-rights movement for profit is an absurdity," she said. "As a matter of fact, (protest) costs you."

Crossed, who has served jail time for civil disobedience during various protests, is former executive director and current board member of the Seamless Garment Network, a group that opposes abortion, war, euthanasia, the death penalty and other threats to life. The group was mentioned in oral arguments during the Supreme Court hearing, she said, and — with other such organizations as the Southern Christian Leadership Conference — filed a brief in support of the pro-life plaintiffs. Crossed said that the pro-choice community had wounded its credibility with its allies on the left by using RICO against protesters.

"They were willing to risk the freedom of speech of all leftist pro-



File photo

Police stand in front of pro-life activists protesting on April 21, 1999, outside the Planned Parenthood offices in Rochester.

testers in order to advance their own narrow agenda," she said. Crossed also said using RICO against protesters ignored American history, noting that civil rights for blacks were won through civil disobedience.

"Every major change that has come about in this country has come about because people have broken the law," she said.

Cathy Cleaver, director of planning and information for the U.S. bishops' Secretariat for Pro-Life Activities, said the ruling blocked the National Organization for Women's strategy of using the courts to make changes in the law.

"The Supreme Court refused NOW's strategy to redefine pro-life protesters as extortionists," she said.

"Maintaining the distinction between protest and extortion is a small but meaningful legal victory for the pro-life cause," she said.

Writing for the court's majority, Chief Justice William Rehnquist said the actions of the abortion-clinic protesters did not constitute acquiring the clinics' property. Reaching such a conclusion would require accepting "the notion that merely interfering with or depriving someone of property is sufficient to constitute extortion," he wrote.

The Supreme Court had ruled in

1994 that the RICO law does not require that an economic motive be established for its provisions to be applied, and that, therefore, the clinics could seek injunctive relief from the protesters. Lower courts and the 7th U.S. Circuit Court of Appeals then approved an injunction against the protesters, barring them from interfering with clinic operations for 10 years, and ordered them to pay more than \$250,000 in damages.

Family Research Council President Ken Connor said the case stemmed from pro-choice supporters attempting to silence their opposition.

"Acts of violence directed at abortion clinics, abortionists or women seeking abortions are wrong and already against the law and should be prosecuted without recourse to RICO," his statement said. "What NOW and the other pro-abortion groups want to do is threaten pro-lifers with financial ruin in order to silence debate."

Activist groups ranging from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals to disability rights groups had filed briefs supporting the right to protest without fear of being prosecuted for racketeering and extortion.

Contains reporting by Rob Cullivan in Rochester.