News



Sr. Norma Pimentel, director of Catholic Charities of the Rio Grande Valley in Texas, speaks with a young resident of a tent camp Feb. 29, 2020, in Matamoros, Mexico. (CNS/David Agren)

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The Rev. Timothy Keller, an evangelical Christian theologian who died earlier this year, and Catholic Sr. Norma Pimentel, known for her work with migrants, have been chosen by a Christian organization to be the first recipients of its Civic Renewal Award.

The awards are being given by the Center for Christianity and Public Life, a group founded last year by a former official from President Barack Obama's administration and dedicated to furthering the "credibility of Christian resources" for the "public good." Offered at the group's inaugural summit next month, the prize is meant to honor Christians who show "exemplary contributions to the health and well-being of their communities and nation."

"When the public thinks of Christian leadership, they should think of Christians who served the public, like Sr. Norma Pimentel and Tim Keller," Michael Wear, founder and head of the organization, said in a statement.

Wear, an evangelical Christian who helped lead Obama's campaign faith outreach efforts as well as working in the then-president's White House Office of Faith-Based and Neighborhood Partnerships, is known for operating at the intersection of religion and politics — often among Democrats. He wrote a book on the topic — *Reclaiming Hope: Lessons Learned in the Obama White House About the Future of Faith in America* — and previously worked as a political consultant whose clients included religious groups.

In an interview, Wear praised Keller, the founder and longtime pastor of Redeemer Presbyterian Church in New York City, a megachurch affiliated with the Presbyterian Church in America. Wear singled out Hope for New York, a faith-based group associated with Keller that helps assemble "resources to support non-profit organizations serving the poor and marginalized in New York City."

Keller, Wear said, "transformed the way many pastors of many churches thought about the city."

A co-founder of The Gospel Coalition, Keller was long associated with conservative Christianity. But his self-described "winsome" approach to ministry has more recently been criticized by some of his fellow evangelicals as too nonconfrontational during a time when, they argue, America has become hostile to Christianity. Keller also came under fire from some conservative Christians for expressing skepticism about former President Donald Trump. Keller died in May at age 72 after a prolonged struggle with pancreatic cancer.

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Center for Christianity and Public Life officials also lauded Pimentel for her "tireless efforts in serving and advocating for the marginalized and vulnerable," saying her "commitment to compassionate and selfless service exemplifies the values at the core of CCPL's mission."

She rose to prominence in 2014 when she helped organize a respite center run by Catholic Charities along the U.S.-Mexico border that offered aid to migrants after they were released by Border Patrol. Initially, support for Pimentel's work extended across political and religious divisions, earning her praise from Republicans, Democrats and even the pope, with some referring to her as "Pope Francis' favorite nun." In 2018, she was awarded the Laetare Medal from the University of Notre Dame, seen by many as the highest honor in the U.S. Catholic Church.

However, recent years have seen Pimentel's work come under fire from right-wing Catholics and a small band of Republican immigration hard-liners. She was named in a 2022 lawsuit filed by a conservative PAC targeting groups that offered humanitarian aid at the Southern border, for example, and a coalition of right-wing Catholic organizations hosted an event earlier this year that called for the government to stop funding Catholic groups that work along the border — including Catholic Charities. Even so, Pimentel has carried on with her work and continues to be celebrated by many Catholics.

The awards ceremony will take place Nov. 6-7 at the Center for Christianity and Public Life's inaugural For the Good of the Public summit in Washington, D.C. A Center for Christianity and Public Life board member and Michael Luo, editor of

newyorker.com, are expected to present the prizes to Pimentel and a representative for Keller, respectively.