News
Ministry



Sister Mary Lisa Renfer, who is also a physician, is seen in an undated photo examining a medically uninsured patient at St. Mary's Legacy Clinic in Crossville, Tenn. Sister Mary Lisa, a Religious Sister of Mercy of Alma, Mich., is the recipient of Catholic Extension Society's 2024-2025 Lumen Christi Award. The annual award, announced Sept. 20, 2024, is Extension's highest honor given "to people who radiate and reveal the light of Christ present in the communities where they serve." (OSV News/courtesy Catholic Extension Society)

by OSV News

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The Catholic Extension Society has awarded its 2024-2025 Lumen Christi Award to a woman religious who as a physician provides health care to uninsured patients in rural eastern Tennessee.

Sister Mary Lisa Renfer, a Religious Sister of Mercy of Alma, Michigan, is the medical director of St. Mary's Legacy Clinic, a ministry of the Diocese of Knoxville.

"She and her team of staff and volunteers provide primary care to improve the lives of the medically uninsured," said a Sept. 20 news release from Catholic Extension announcing the award. "Driven by her faith and compassion, Sister Mary Lisa said the clinic's goal 'is to bring the love of Christ to them so that they know they have dignity and that they have worth.'"

As this year's award recipient, Mary Lisa will receive $50,000 to support her work.

Taking its name from the Latin words for "light of Christ," the Lumen Christi Award was established in 1978. It is Catholic Extension's highest honor presented annually "to people who radiate and reveal the light of Christ present in the communities where they serve." This year, 37 dioceses submitted nominations for the award.

"Sister Mary Lisa knows that her mission is about more than providing health services to those in greatest need," Father Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension, said in a statement. "It is clear she is also eradicating sickness in people's spirit. She is truly a light in their darkest moments, and for that, it is our great honor to recognize Sister Mary Lisa with this year's Lumen Christi Award."

Upon receiving the award, Mary Lisa said, "It is a privilege and joy for me to be a part of this. My life goal is to serve the Lord forever in heaven and bring as many people as possible with me. ... And my goal here is to bring the light of Christ to each person I meet; that's the goal of all of us who work together at the clinic."

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Mary Lisa's journey of service began with a mission trip to Ecuador during college, where she witnessed the abuse and suffering of children. Wanting to make a difference, she went on to Michigan State University, where she graduated with a doctor of osteopathic medicine degree. In 2020, after she completed her residency, she began working as a leader and physician of St. Mary's Legacy Clinic.

During her time as medical director, the number of patients has nearly doubled, according to Catholic Extension. As needs increase in the area served by the clinic, it is expanding its services and welcoming more patients. On average it is seeing one new patient per day.

Last year, the free clinic had nearly 1,500 patient visits and covered 11,000 miles. They recently added a new clinic site, bringing the total number up to 10. A majority of the patients served are not Catholic.

Since 1905, Catholic Extension, a Chicago-based nonprofit, has supported Catholic faith communities in the nation's poorest regions. In the Diocese of Knoxville, it helps rural communities and ministries to vulnerable populations of the diocese.