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by Catholic News Service

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A Daughter of Charity in Illinois who serves children and families living in housing projects, a priest who leads a faith community encompassing four churches in western Minnesota and a priest who ministers to four missions in Native Alaskan villages along the coast of the Bering Sea all have something in common.

They are among seven finalists for Catholic Extension's 44th Lumen Christi Award, the highest award the Chicago-based mission organization gives to people "who radiate and reveal the light of Christ" present in the communities they serve.

The other finalists include two women religious whose joint ministry spans eight counties in east Tennessee reaching over 10,000 people, mostly immigrants; a young Catholic mother living in Melvin, Texas, who led the renovation of a mission church; a Mississippi priest working to develop leaders among the Choctaw people; and a couple who are members of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe in South Dakota who grew up in the same Catholic community they now serve, St. Francis Mission.

"During this past year in which many of our schools, church buildings and places of business 'went dark,' we are reminded that the light of Christ never went out in our midst," Fr. Jack Wall, president of Catholic Extension, said Aug. 10 in announcing the finalists.

"The stories of these Lumen Christi Award finalists reveal the many places and ways that the light of Christ has been shining brightly all along," he said.

Nominations for the award were submitted by diocesan bishops from across the United States and its territories earlier this year.

This year's finalists, chosen from 34 nominees, will each receive $10,000 to support and enhance their ministry. From among these finalists, the 2021-22 Lumen Christi Award recipient will be selected. The winner, who will be announced in September, will receive a $25,000 grant, along with an additional $25,000 grant for the nominating diocese.

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Highlights of each finalist's life and ministry follow:

- Sr. Julia Huiskamp, a Daughter of Charity, has served children and families living in the housing projects of East St. Louis, Illinois, in the Diocese of Belleville for the past 35 years. In 1986, she converted a former drug house into a classroom and founded the first Griffin Center, which has since expanded to five public housing locations, serving 350 children. The center's sites offer the children a safe environment to come to after school and during the summer months, where they have access to tutors, meals and recreational activities.
- Fr. Brian Oestreich leads the Spirit of Life Area Faith Community, which encompasses four churches in Diocese of New Ulm in western Minnesota. Realizing the often-hidden poverty that exists in their area, parishioners have worked closely with the priest to create ministries that feed and clothe thousands each year — a ministry that now spans three states and five dioceses.
- Fr. Stan Jaszek, in the Diocese of Fairbanks, Alaska, serves four missions in the Native Alaskan villages of the Yukon-Kuskokwim Delta region, along the coast of the Bering Sea. He has dedicated his time "to develop relationships founded in trust and respect, through immersing himself in the Yup'ik Eskimo traditions," inviting people to deepen their relationship with God while affirming the spirituality and culture of the people he serves.
- Srs. María Imelda Quechol and Eloísa Torralba Aquino are Missionary Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus "Ad Gentes" serving a largely immigrant population in the Diocese of Knoxville, Tennessee. The sisters offer "a range of spiritual and human support" to over 10,000 people in eight counties.
- Racheal Jacoby took the lead in the renovation of a small mission church in Melvin, Texas, in the Diocese of San Angelo, which was built in 1913 with the help of Catholic Extension. Parishioners celebrated the first Mass in the newly renovated church in September 2020. Jacoby's efforts to repair and renovate St. Francis Xavier Mission has helped revitalized this rural Catholic community located in the geographic heart of Texas.
- Fr. Bob Goodyear, a priest of the Missionary Servants of the Most Holy Trinity, ministers in the Diocese of Jackson, Mississippi, where he was sent as a young priest to serve the Holy Rosary Indian Mission, which has been supported by Catholic Extension since 1926. He learned all he could about the culture of the local Choctaw people, even learning their language and creating a Vatican-approved translation of the Mass in Choctaw. He works on developing leaders in the community to pass the faith on to the next generation.

- Jenny and Ben Black Bear III, members of the Rosebud Sioux Tribe from South Dakota, grew up in the same Catholic community they now serve, St. Francis Mission, in the Diocese of Rapid City, South Dakota. The couple help youth on the reservation experience the "joy and hope" of their Catholic faith and Lakota values. Since 2015, they have helped hundreds in their community prepare for the sacraments of baptism, first Communion, and confirmation. The Black Bears are among the many lay leaders Catholic Extension has supported for many years.

Catholic Extension has been supporting the work and ministries of the nation's mission dioceses since its founding in 1905. It raises funds to help build faith communities and churches in these dioceses, which are rural, cover a large geographic area, and have limited personnel and pastoral resources.