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U.S. Department of Justice

Immigration and Naturalization Service

IDENTIFYING DATA COVERED TO
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INFORMATION OF THE PETITIONER

OFFICE OF ADMINISTRATIVE APPEALS
425 Eye Street N.W.
ULLB, 3rd Floor
Washington, D.C. 20536



File: WAC-99-227-52125 Office: California Service Center

Date: 07 JAN 2002

IN RE: Petitioner:
Beneficiary:



Petition: Petition for Special Immigrant Religious Worker Pursuant to Section 203(b)(4) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (the "Act"), 8 U.S.C. 1153(b)(4), as described at Section 101(a)(27)(C) of the Act, 8 U.S.C. 1101(a)(27)(C)

IN BEHALF OF PETITIONER: Self-represented

Public Copy

INSTRUCTIONS:

This is the decision in your case. All documents have been returned to the office which originally decided your case. Any further inquiry must be made to that office.

If you believe the law was inappropriately applied or the analysis used in reaching the decision was inconsistent with the information provided or with precedent decisions, you may file a motion to reconsider. Such a motion must state the reasons for reconsideration and be supported by any pertinent precedent decisions. Any motion to reconsider must be filed within 30 days of the decision that the motion seeks to reconsider, as required under 8 C.F.R. 103.5(a)(1)(i).

If you have new or additional information which you wish to have considered, you may file a motion to reopen. Such a motion must state the new facts to be proved at the reopened proceeding and be supported by affidavits or other documentary evidence. Any motion to reopen must be filed within 30 days of the decision that the motion seeks to reopen, except that failure to file before this period expires may be excused in the discretion of the Service where it is demonstrated that the delay was reasonable and beyond the control of the applicant or petitioner. Id.

Any motion must be filed with the office which originally decided your case along with a fee of \$110 as required under 8 C.F.R. 103.7.

FOR THE ASSOCIATE COMMISSIONER,
EXAMINATIONS

Robert P. Wiemann
for Robert P. Wiemann, Director
Administrative Appeals Office

DISCUSSION: The immigrant visa petition was denied by the Director, California Service Center, and is now before the Associate Commissioner for Examinations on appeal. The appeal will be dismissed.

The petitioner is a church. It seeks classification of the beneficiary as a special immigrant religious worker pursuant to section 203(b)(4) of the Immigration and Nationality Act (the "Act"), 8 U.S.C. 1153(b)(4), in order to employ him as a "deacon" at a salary stated to range from \$26,000 to \$36,000 per year.

The director denied the petition finding that the beneficiary's claimed volunteer work with the church, while engaged in a full-time secular occupation, was insufficient to satisfy the requirement that he had been continuously carrying on a religious occupation for at least the two years preceding the filing of the petition. The director also found that the petitioner failed to establish the ability to pay the proffered wage.

On appeal, an official of the petitioner argued that the beneficiary's voluntary activities have been performed at the full-time level of at least 35 hours per week and that the prior experience requirement has been satisfied. The official also stated that the church will have the ability to pay the beneficiary as soon as its building program is completed.

Section 203(b)(4) of the Act provides classification to qualified special immigrant religious workers as described in section 101(a)(27)(C) of the Act, 8 U.S.C. 1101(a)(27)(C), which pertains to an immigrant who:

(i) for at least 2 years immediately preceding the time of application for admission, has been a member of a religious denomination having a bona fide nonprofit, religious organization in the United States;

(ii) seeks to enter the United States--

(I) solely for the purpose of carrying on the vocation of a minister of that religious denomination,

(II) before October 1, 2003, in order to work for the organization at the request of the organization in a professional capacity in a religious vocation or occupation, or

(III) before October 1, 2003, in order to work for the organization (or for a bona fide organization which is affiliated with the religious denomination and is exempt from taxation as an organization described in section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Code of 1986) at the request of

the organization in a religious vocation or occupation;
and

(iii) has been carrying on such vocation, professional work, or other work continuously for at least the 2-year period described in clause (i).

The petitioner in this matter is a church claiming a congregation of 500 members and a single employee, the pastor. The beneficiary is described as a native and citizen of Nigeria who last entered the United States in 1993 and was granted employment authorization through another proceeding. His current immigration status is unknown.

In order to establish eligibility for classification as a special immigrant religious worker, the petitioner must satisfy each of several eligibility requirements.

The petitioner must establish that the beneficiary had had the requisite two years of continuous experience in a religious occupation.

8 C.F.R. 204.5(m)(1) states, in pertinent part, that:

All three types of religious workers must have been performing the vocation, professional work, or other work continuously (either abroad or in the United States) for at least the two year period immediately preceding the filing of the petition.

The petition was filed on October 11, 1999. Therefore, the petitioner must establish that the beneficiary was continuously carrying on a religious occupation since at least October 11, 1997.

The statute and its implementing regulations require that a beneficiary had been continuously carrying on the religious occupation specified in the petition for the two years preceding filing. The regulations are silent on the question of volunteer work satisfying the requirement. The pertinent regulations were drafted in recognition of the special circumstances of some religious workers, specifically those engaged in a religious vocation, in that they may not be salaried in the conventional sense and may not follow a conventional work schedule. The regulations distinguish religious vocations from lay religious occupations. 8 C.F.R. 204.5(m)(2) defines a religious vocation, in part, as a calling to religious life evidenced by the taking of vows. While such persons are not employed *per se* in the conventional sense of salaried employment, they are fully financially supported and maintained by their religious institution and are answerable to that institution. The regulation defines lay religious occupations, in contrast, in general terms as an activity

related to a "traditional religious function." *Id.* Such lay persons are employed in the conventional sense of salaried employment. The regulations recognize this distinction by requiring that in order to qualify for special immigrant classification in a religious occupation, the job offer for a lay employee of a religious organization must show that he or she will be employed in the conventional sense of salaried employment and will not be dependent on supplemental employment. See 8 C.F.R. 204.5(m)(4). Because the statute requires two years of continuous experience in the same position for which special immigrant classification is sought, the Service interprets its own regulations to require that, in cases of lay persons seeking to engage in a religious occupation, the prior experience must have been full-time salaried employment in order to qualify as well.

Furthermore, in evaluating a claim of prior work experience, the Service must distinguish between common participation in the religious life of a denomination and engaging continuously in a religious occupation. It is traditional in many religious organizations for members to volunteer a great deal of their time serving on committees, visiting the sick, serving in the choir, teaching children's religion classes, and assisting the ordained ministry without being considered to be carrying on a religious occupation. It is not reasonable to assume that the petitioning religious organization, or any employer, could place the same responsibilities, the same control of time, and the same delegation of duties on an unpaid volunteer as it could on a salaried employee. Nor is there any means for the Service to verify a claim of past "volunteer work" similar to verifying a claim of past employment. For all these reasons, the Service holds that lay persons who perform volunteer activities, especially while also engaged in a secular occupation, are not engaged in a religious occupation and that the voluntary activities do not constitute qualifying work experience for the purpose of an employment-based special immigrant visa petition.

In this case, the petitioner stated that the beneficiary had been a full-time volunteer with the church for the two years preceding filing while also engaged in full-time secular employment in the health care field and as a part-time substitute teacher in the public school system. For the reasons discussed above, it must be concluded that the petitioner has failed to overcome this issue as a ground for denial of the petition. The beneficiary was continuously engaged in a secular health-care occupation. His claimed voluntary activities with his church, regardless of the amount of time devoted to such activities, is not considered engagement in a religious occupation.

A petitioner also must demonstrate its ability to pay the proffered wage.

8 C.F.R. 204.5(g)(2) states, in pertinent part, that:

Any petition filed by or for an employment-based immigrant which requires an offer of employment must be accompanied by evidence that the prospective United States employer has the ability to pay the wage. The petitioner must demonstrate this ability at the time the priority date is established and continuing until the beneficiary obtains lawful permanent residence. Evidence of this ability shall be either in the form of annual reports, federal tax returns, or audited financial statements.

The petitioner in this matter has not furnished the church's annual reports, federal tax returns, or audited financial statements. Therefore, the petitioner has not satisfied the documentary requirement of this provision.

Furthermore, a petitioner must establish eligibility at the time of filing. See Matter of Katigbak, 14 I&N Dec. 45, 49 (Comm. 1971). The claim that the petitioner will have the ability to pay the proffered wage at a later date is not sufficient to satisfy this requirement. The petitioner has not demonstrated that it had the ability to pay a salary of \$26,000 to \$36,000 per year as of the date the petition was filed.

The burden of proof in these proceedings rests solely with the petitioner. Section 291 of the Act, 8 U.S.C. 1361. Here, the petitioner has not sustained that burden.

ORDER: The appeal is dismissed.