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U.S. Department of Homeland Security
Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services

PUBLIC COPY

ADMINISTRATIVE APPEALS OFFICE
425 Eye Street N.W.
BCIS; AAO, 20 Mass, 3/F
Washington, D.C. 20536



JUN 05 2003

File: WAC-01-217-53559 Office: California Service Center Date:

IN RE: Petitioner: [Redacted]
Beneficiary: [Redacted]

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)

ON BEHALF OF PETITIONER: [Redacted]

Identifying data deleted to prevent clearly unwarranted invasion of personal privacy

INSTRUCTIONS:

This is the decision in your case. All documents have been returned to the office that 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 that 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 Bureau of Citizenship and Immigration Services (Bureau) 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 that originally decided your case along with a fee of \$110 as required under 8 C.F.R. § 103.7.

Robert P. Wiemann, Director
Administrative Appeals Office

DISCUSSION: The immigrant visa petition was denied by the Acting Director, California Service Center. The matter is now before the Administrative Appeals Office (AAO) 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 her as the "Director of Religious Education" at an annual salary of \$20,000.

The director denied the petition finding that the beneficiary's claimed voluntary service with the petitioner did not satisfy the statutory requirement that she have been continuously carrying on a religious occupation for at least the two years preceding the filing of the petition.

On appeal, counsel for the petitioner submitted a brief arguing that the regulations do not require that the prior experience be in a paid capacity and that the beneficiary's position is a qualifying religious occupation according to the regulations.

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 the Roman Catholic Diocese of Oakland. It did not disclose the size of its congregation or the number of employees. The beneficiary is described as a native and citizen of Mexico who last entered the United States on May 3, 1999 in an undisclosed manner. Her current immigration status is unknown. The petitioner disclosed at the space provided on the petition form that the beneficiary has worked in the United States without authorization.

The issue to be examined in this proceeding is whether the petitioner has established that the beneficiary has had the requisite two years of continuous work experience in the proffered position.

Regulations at 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(m)(1) state, 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 April 13, 2001. Therefore, the petitioner must establish that the beneficiary had been continuously engaged in a religious occupation for at least the two years since April 13, 1999.

The petitioner's chancellor, stated, in pertinent part, in a letter dated April 13, 2001, that:

[The beneficiary] has been pursuing her religious occupation continuously for more than two years immediately preceding this petition. Since, 1997, she has been pursuing her religious occupation on a full time basis as the Director of Religious Education for the Spanish Speaking Community at St. Peter Martyr Parish. In that capacity she plans and develops religious education, teaches religion to youngsters, young adults and parents, and advises and supports other catechists.

In response to the Bureau's request for additional evidence, the petitioner's chancellor stated, in pertinent part, that:

[The beneficiary] has been working at the parish on a volunteer basis. The Parish gives her a stipend of \$480.00 per month. If and when she obtains her work authorization, the Parish will pay a salary of \$20,000.

Other means of support include \$50 from individual families for planning weddings and quinceaneras. She averages about four weddings and quinceaneras a month, or \$200 a month. She receives about \$165 a month for rental property in Salamanca, Mexico. She also works 7 hours a week as a tutor, averaging \$560 a month. Thus, over the two year period she has an annual earnings of about \$16,000.

On appeal, the petitioner's counsel stated that neither the law nor regulations require that the two-year work experience be gained through paid employment in order to qualify for Special Immigrant classification. Counsel asserts that the only requirement is that the previous vocation or occupation be continuous. Counsel cites several unpublished AAO decisions, which have no precedential effect in this proceeding. See 8 C.F.R. 103.3(c).

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 Bureau 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 Bureau 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 Bureau to verify a claim of past "volunteer work" similar to verifying a claim of past employment. For all these reasons, the Bureau 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 addition, the petitioner provided no proof of the beneficiary's alleged residence in the United States since 1997. Here, the petitioner asserts that the beneficiary has been a volunteer with the church since 1997, while also working as a marriage planner and tutor. For the reasons discussed above, such activities do not constitute continuous experience in a religious occupation.

The Bureau is therefore, unable to conclude that the beneficiary had been engaged in a religious full time religious occupation or otherwise, during the two-year qualifying period. For this reason, the petition may not be approved.

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

ORDER: The appeal is dismissed.