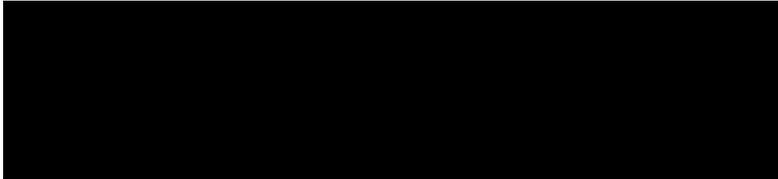


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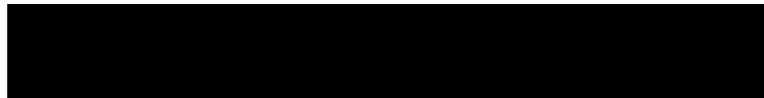
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FILE: [Redacted]
EAC 01178 51170

Office: VERMONT SERVICE CENTER

Date: SEP 30 2005

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)

ON BEHALF OF PETITIONER:



INSTRUCTIONS:

This is the decision of the Administrative Appeals Office 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.

Mar Johnson

S Robert P. Wiemann, Director
Administrative Appeals Office

DISCUSSION: The employment-based immigrant visa petition was denied by the Director, Vermont Service Center. The Administrative Appeals Office (AAO) dismissed a subsequent appeal. The petitioner's motion to reopen was dismissed as untimely filed. The matter is now before the AAO on a motion to reconsider. The motion to reconsider will be granted; the petition will be denied.

The petitioner is a religious association. It seeks to classify 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), to perform services as a religious worker. The director determined that the petitioner had not established that the beneficiary had been engaged continuously in a qualifying religious vocation or occupation for two full years immediately preceding the filing of the petition or that the position qualifies as that of a religious worker.

A motion to reconsider must state the reasons for reconsideration and be supported by any pertinent precedent decisions to establish that the decision was based on an incorrect application of law or Citizenship and Immigration Services (CIS) policy. 8 C.F.R. § 103.5(a)(3).

The petitioner's initial motion was dismissed as untimely filed. On the present motion, counsel submits evidence that the previous motion, with its supporting documentation, was timely. This evidence is sufficient to reconsider the AAO's decision dismissing the motion.

On motion, counsel submits additional documentation.

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, 2008, 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, 2008, 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 regulation at 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(m)(1) echoes the above statutory language, and states, in pertinent part, that "[a]n alien, or any person in behalf of the alien, may file a Form I-360 visa petition for classification under section 203(b)(4) of the Act as a section 101(a)(27)(C) special immigrant religious worker. Such a petition may

be filed by or for an alien, who (either abroad or in the United States) for at least the two years immediately preceding the filing of the petition has been a member of a religious denomination which has a bona fide nonprofit religious organization in the United States.” The regulation indicates that the “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 regulation at 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(m)(3) states, in pertinent part, that each petition for a religious worker must be accompanied by:

(ii) A letter from an authorized official of the religious organization in the United States which (as applicable to the particular alien) establishes:

(A) That, immediately prior to the filing of the petition, the alien has the required two years of membership in the denomination and the required two years of experience in the religious vocation, professional religious work, or other religious work.

The petition was filed on April 26, 2001. Therefore, the petitioner must establish that the beneficiary was continuously working in the religious work throughout the two-year period immediately preceding that date.

On motion, counsel admits that the beneficiary did not work in a religious occupation from the date of her arrival in the United States in 1999 until the date the petition was filed. In a September 29, 2003 affidavit submitted on motion, the beneficiary stated that she came to the United States on November 30, 1999, and “sometime” in July 2000, she answered the petitioner’s advertisement for the position of youth coordinator. The beneficiary stated that she began “spending [her] weekends with the [petitioner] helping in the youth outreach program,” and that in April the petitioner “formally petitioned” for her as a religious worker.

The legislative history of the religious worker provision of the Immigration Act of 1990 states that a substantial amount of case law had developed on religious organizations and occupations, the implication being that Congress intended that this body of case law be employed in implementing the provision, with the addition of “a number of safeguards . . . to prevent abuse.” See H.R. Rep. No. 101-723, at 75 (1990).

The statute states at section 101(a)(27)(C)(iii) that the religious worker must have been carrying on the religious vocation, professional work, or other work continuously for the immediately preceding two years. Under former Schedule A (prior to the Immigration Act of 1990), a person seeking entry to perform duties for a religious organization was required to be engaged “principally” in such duties. “Principally” was defined as more than 50 percent of the person’s working time. Under prior law a minister of religion was required to demonstrate that he/she had been “continuously” carrying on the vocation of minister for the two years immediately preceding the time of application. The term “continuously” was interpreted to mean that one did not take up any other occupation or vocation. *Matter of B*, 3 I&N Dec. 162 (CO 1948).

Later decisions on religious workers conclude that, if the worker is to receive no salary for church work, the assumption is that he/she would be required to earn a living by obtaining other employment. *Matter of Bisulca*, 10 I&N Dec. 712 (Reg. Comm. 1963) and *Matter of Sinha*, 10 I&N Dec. 758 (Reg. Comm. 1963).

The term “continuously” also is discussed in a 1980 decision where the Board of Immigration Appeals determined that a minister of religion was not continuously carrying on the vocation of minister when he was

a full-time student who was devoting only nine hours a week to religious duties. *Matter of Varughese*, 17 I&N Dec. 399 (BIA 1980).

In line with these past decisions and the intent of Congress, it is clear, therefore that to be continuously carrying on the religious work means to do so on a full-time basis. That the qualifying work should be paid employment, not volunteering, is inherent in those past decisions which hold that, if the religious worker is not paid, the assumption is that he/she is engaged in other, secular employment. The idea that a religious undertaking would be unsalaried is applicable only to those in a religious vocation who in accordance with their vocation live in a clearly unsalaried environment, the primary examples in the regulations being nuns, monks, and religious brothers and sisters. Clearly, therefore, the qualifying two years of religious work must be full-time and generally salaried. To hold otherwise would be contrary to the intent of Congress.

In the rare case where volunteer work might constitute prior qualifying experience, the petitioner must establish that the beneficiary, while continuously and primarily engaged in the traditional religious occupation, was self-sufficient or that his or her financial well being was clearly maintained by means other than secular employment.

The petitioner asserts on motion that CIS misunderstands the significance of the unpaid volunteer position in "context of the religious-cultural aspect of the church in the Philippines." According to the petitioner:

[An occupation] is perceived to be a specific work done with remuneration and a contract with a beginning and an end. A vocation on the other hand is a special, unique, personal calling to carry out a mission; it remains with the person called wherever he/she goes; it is a lifetime commitment. Pastoral care and work such as counseling and ministering to the youth is a form of vocation.

Nonetheless, by her own admission, the beneficiary did not work in the religious occupation or vocation for two full years prior to the filing of the visa petition. The record reflects that during at least part of the reporting period, the beneficiary worked as a clerk with [REDACTED]. The petitioner submitted no documentary evidence to corroborate the work performed by the beneficiary for the petitioning organization. Going on record without supporting documentary evidence is not sufficient for purposes of meeting the burden of proof in these proceedings. *Matter of Soffici*, 22 I&N Dec. 158, 165 (Comm. 1998) (citing *Matter of Treasure Craft of California*, 14 I&N Dec. 190 (Reg. Comm. 1972)).

The petitioner has not established that the beneficiary was continuously employed in a qualifying religious occupation or vocation for two full years preceding the filing of the visa petition.

Although not specifically addressed in the AAO's decision on appeal, the director also determined that the petitioner had not established that the position qualifies as that of a religious worker.

Pursuant to 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(m)(1), the alien must be coming to the United States at the request of the religious organization to work in a religious occupation. To establish eligibility for special immigrant classification, the petitioner must establish that the specific position that it is offering qualifies as a religious occupation as defined in these proceedings. The statute is silent on what constitutes a "religious occupation" and the regulation states only that it is an activity relating to a traditional religious function. The regulation does not define the term "traditional religious function" and instead provides a brief list of examples. The list reveals that not all employees of a religious organization are considered to be engaged in a religious occupation for the purpose of special immigrant classification. The regulation states that positions such as cantor, missionary, or

religious instructor are examples of qualifying religious occupations. Persons in such positions would reasonably be expected to perform services directly related to the creed and practice of the religion. The regulation reflects that nonqualifying positions are those whose duties are primarily administrative or secular in nature. The lists of qualifying and nonqualifying occupations derive from the legislative history. H.R. Rpt. 101-723, at 75 (Sept. 19, 1990).

CIS therefore interprets the term "traditional religious function" to require a demonstration that the duties of the position are directly related to the religious creed of the denomination, that the position is defined and recognized by the governing body of the denomination, and that the position is traditionally a permanent, full-time, salaried occupation within the denomination.

The petitioner did not indicate the specific job title for the proffered position. In its letters of April 15, 2001 and April 2, 2002, the petitioner stated that the beneficiary's duties would include catechism, counseling of members, organizing group prayers and other religious activities, and acting as a facilitator of religious retreats and outreach programs.

On appeal, counsel stated that the beneficiary's prior experience as a Salesian Cooperator, where she gained experience as a "liturgical worker, religious instructor, religious counselor, catechist, which she will perform for [the petitioner], she more than qualifies as a religious worker." However, the AAO noted in its previous decision that the petitioner did not indicate that the proffered position was that of a Salesian Cooperator.

The petitioner never specified any particular position that the beneficiary was expected to fill. Therefore, the petitioner did not establish that the proffered position was directly related to its religious creed, that it was defined and recognized by the Catholic Church, or that the position is traditionally a permanent, full-time, salaried position within the denomination.

In its September 29, 2003 letter submitted on motion, the petitioner stated that it had "taken over the management of the Scalibrini House of Studies," and that the beneficiary's duties would be that of a youth/media coordinator. The petitioner identifies the duties of this position as being an advocate and link for youth, including interpreting the needs of the youth, providing multicultural and multilingual ministry as needed, and promoting the pastoral care of the youth. The petitioner stated that the duties would also include serving as a recruiter for leaders in the youth ministry and faith formation of youth.

A petitioner must establish eligibility at the time of filing; a petition cannot be approved at a future date after the petitioner or beneficiary becomes eligible under a new set of facts. *Matter of Katigbak*, 14 I&N Dec. 45, 49 (Comm. 1971); 8 C.F.R. § 103.2(b)(12).

The evidence in the record before the director did not establish that the position qualifies as that of a religious worker.

Beyond the decision of the director and the AAO, the petitioner has not established that it has the ability to pay the beneficiary the proffered wage. The regulation at 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(g)(2) states in pertinent part:

Ability of prospective employer to pay wage. 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 proffered 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 copies of annual reports, federal tax returns, or audited financial statements.

The petitioner stated that it would pay the beneficiary a \$5.75 per hour for a 40-hour work week. The petitioner, however, submitted no evidence of its ability to pay the beneficiary the proffered wage.

Accordingly, the petitioner has not established that it had the continuing ability to pay the proffered wage as of the date the petition was filed. This deficiency constitutes an additional ground for which the petition may not be approved.

An application or petition that fails to comply with the technical requirements of the law may be denied by the AAO even if the Service Center does not identify all of the grounds for denial in the initial decision. *See Spencer Enterprises, Inc. v. United States*, 229 F. Supp. 2d 1025, 1043 (E.D. Cal. 2001), *aff'd*, 345 F.3d 683 (9th Cir. 2003); *see also Dor v. INS*, 891 F.2d 997, 1002 n. 9 (2d Cir. 1989)(noting that the AAO reviews appeals on a *de novo* basis).

The petition will be denied for the above stated reasons, with each considered as an independent and alternative basis for denial. In visa petition proceedings, the burden of proving eligibility for the benefit sought remains entirely with the petitioner. Section 291 of the Act, 8 U.S.C. § 1361. Here, that burden has not been met. Accordingly, the decision of the service center director and that of the AAO dismissing the appeal will be affirmed

ORDER: The motion is dismissed.