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

ADMINISTRATIVE APPEALS OFFICE

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



AUG 14 2003

File: WAC 01 218 54857 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]

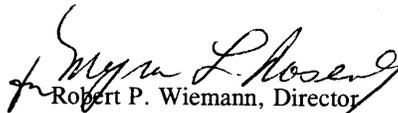
**INSTRUCTIONS:**

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 on appeal before the Administrative Appeals Office (AAO). The appeal will be dismissed.

The petitioner 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), to perform services as a religious youth counselor at an annual salary of \$15,000.

The acting director denied the petition finding that the beneficiary's prior experience did not satisfy the statutory requirement that he had been continuously carrying on a full-time salaried religious occupation for the two-year period immediately preceding the filing date of the petition.

On appeal, counsel for the petitioner asserts that the decision to deny the petition was arbitrary, capricious, contrary to law, and an abuse of discretion. Counsel further asserts that the director's finding that the beneficiary's prior experience must have been full-time and salaried in order to qualify for special immigrant classification has no basis in law or fact.

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 record reflects that the petitioner in this matter is a church with 385 members from the pacific island of Tonga. The beneficiary is a native and citizen of Tonga who last entered the United States as a nonimmigrant visitor on September 21, 1987, with authorization to remain no longer than March 20, 1988. The beneficiary has remained in the United States longer than authorized. He has been a member of the petitioning church since 1997 and attended the Pacific School of Religion in Berkely, California as a part-time student from March 1998 through May 2000. On May 21, 2000, he was awarded a Certificate of Ministry Studies from that school.

The issue to be examined in this proceeding is whether the petitioner has established that the beneficiary has 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 30, 2001. Therefore, the petitioner must establish that the beneficiary has been continuously engaged in a religious occupation for the two-year period beginning on April 30, 1999.

On appeal, counsel states that the statute does not require that the two-year work experience be gained through full-time salaried employment in order to qualify for special immigrant classification. Moreover, counsel asserts that studying may be considered carrying on a vocation if it can be demonstrated that such study is consistent with the ministerial vocation and provided that the minister continues to perform the duties of a minister of religion.

The record reflects that the proffered position, religious youth counselor, is not vocational in nature; rather, it is a lay position for which the petitioner states that no specific religious degree is required. The petitioner merely indicates that the position requires two years of participation in its programs and evidence of lay leadership development.

The petitioner states that the beneficiary has provided religious services, as a religious youth counselor, since June 1995. In a letter dated January 22, 2002, the petitioner indicates that the

beneficiary works four days per week, for a total of ten hours weekly; accompanies the youth of the church on ten or more outings per year, lasting from ten to four days each; and represents the church at annual conferences. The petitioner states that in addition to expenses, the beneficiary received a stipend of \$4,000 per year for his services. The church also underwrote part of the beneficiary's program of studies by paying one-half of his tuition, approximately \$2,000 per year for the two-year program. The petitioner states that the beneficiary has been financially supported by his spouse and has also worked with Allied Security and in various odd jobs such as landscaping for friends. The petitioner also states that the beneficiary has received no W-2 Forms for any of the work he performed, including his work for the petitioner, because he does not have a social security number.

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 the filing date of the petition. 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.

The record reflects that from April 30, 1999 through April 30, 2001, the beneficiary was a part-time student; worked at various odd jobs; was financially supported by his spouse; and performed part-time services for the petitioner for which he received expenses and a stipend. For the reasons discussed above, such service does not constitute continuous experience in a religious occupation. The Bureau is unable to conclude that the beneficiary has been engaged in a full-time salaried religious occupation during the two-year qualifying period. Therefore, 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.