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Citizenship and Immigration Services

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

File: LIN-01-127-50373 Office: Nebraska Service Center Date: SEP 30 2003

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]

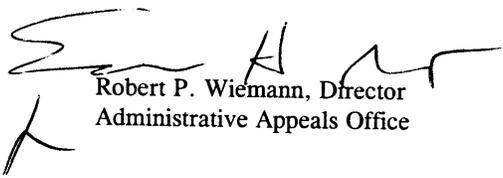
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INSTRUCTIONS:  
This is the decision in your case. All documents have been returned to the office that originally decided your case. Any further inquiry must be made to that office.

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 Director, Nebraska Service Center, and 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 minister 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 an assistant pastor.

The director denied the petition finding that the petitioner failed to establish that the beneficiary had been continuously carrying on the vocation of a minister for at least the two years preceding the filing of the petition or that he would be engaged solely as a minister in the proffered position.

On appeal, the petitioner's counsel states that the beneficiary has actually been carrying out the duties of a minister since 1998. Counsel further states that the Bureau has erred in concluding that volunteer work is non-qualifying.

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 beneficiary is a native and citizen of Nigeria who last entered the United States on June 26, 1998, as a B-2 visitor. The record reflects that the beneficiary has been residing in the United States in an unlawful status.

The first issue to be addressed in this proceeding is whether the petitioner has established that the beneficiary is qualified as a minister as defined in these proceedings.

Regulations at 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(m)(3) state, 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.

(B) That, if the alien is a minister, he or she has authorization to conduct religious worship and to perform other duties usually performed by authorized members of the clergy, including a detailed description of such authorized duties. In appropriate cases, the certificate of ordination or authorization may be requested.

Regulations at 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(m)(2) state, in pertinent part, that:

*Minister* means an individual duly authorized by a recognized religious denomination to conduct religious worship and to perform other duties usually performed by authorized members of the clergy of that religion. In all cases, there must be a reasonable connection between the activities performed and the religious calling of the minister. The term does not include a lay preacher not authorized to perform such duties.

The petitioner submitted certificates of ordination, for the years 1999, 2000, and 2001 issued by the United Christian Church and Ministerial Association (not affiliated with the petitioner), stating that the beneficiary is a minister.

The evidence of record is insufficient to establish that the beneficiary is a qualified minister for the purpose of special immigrant classification. Simply producing documents purported to be certificates of ordination, which are not based on theological training or education, is not proof that an alien is entitled to perform the duties of a minister. *Matter of Rhee*, 16 I&N Dec. 607

(BIA 1978). A lay preacher is not eligible. 8 C.F.R. § 204.5(m)(2). Here, there is no evidence that the beneficiary has any theological education or that the church requires a theological education in ordaining its ministers. For this reason, the petition may not be approved.

The second issue to be addressed in this proceeding is whether the petitioner has established that the alien beneficiary has continuously carried on the vocation of a minister for at least the two years preceding the filing of the petition.

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.

In the case of special immigrant ministers, the alien must have been engaged solely as a minister of the religious denomination for the two-year period in order to qualify for the benefit sought and must intend to be engaged solely in the work of a minister of religion in the United States. *Matter of Faith Assembly Church*, 19 I&N 391 (Comm. 1986).

The petition was filed on March 23, 2001. Therefore, the petitioner must establish that the beneficiary had been continuously and solely carrying on the vocation of a minister of religion since at least March 23, 1999.

The director concluded that a claim of voluntary service to one's church was insufficient to satisfy the requirement of having been continuously engaged in a religious occupation.

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 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 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. 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.

Here, the petitioner asserts that the beneficiary has been a volunteer with the church since August 1998 preaching, teaching, and offering spiritual counselling. For the reasons discussed above, such activities do not constitute continuous experience as a minister.

Furthermore, the petitioner made no claim and submitted no evidence that the beneficiary had been engaged "solely" as a minister of religion during the two-year period or that he would be solely engaged as a minister with the petitioning church. For this reason as well, the petition may not be approved.

Beyond the decision of the director, the petitioner has not demonstrated that a qualifying job offer has been tendered.

8 C.F.R. § 204.5(m)(4) states, in pertinent part, that:

*Job offer.* The letter from the authorized official of the religious organization in the United States must state how the alien will be solely carrying on the vocation of a minister, or how the alien will be paid or remunerated if the alien will work in a professional capacity or in other religious work. The documentation should clearly indicate that the alien will not be solely dependent on supplemental employment or the solicitation of funds for support.

The petitioner has not submitted sufficient evidence that the beneficiary will not be dependent on supplemental income. As the appeal will be dismissed on the grounds discussed, this issue need not be examined further.

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.