

March 22, 2012

Dear Senator/Representative:

We write to express our support for permanently extending the Religious Worker Visa Program. Without congressional action, this important program is set to expire on September 30, 2012.

The Special Immigrant Non-Minister portion of the Religious Worker Visa Program became law in 1990. Originally enacted with a sunset provision, it has enjoyed broad, bipartisan support in Congress and has been reauthorized six times since then.

Under this important program, up to 5,000 visas each year are available for religious workers employed by a broad range of religious denominations and organizations. Religious communities that participate in the program have found these special visas vital to carrying out their work. The following are just a few examples of how large and small religious denominations and organizations use the visas to benefit their own communities and the larger society:

- Catholic dioceses and Catholic institutes of religious men and women rely heavily upon religious sisters, brothers, and lay missionaries from abroad, who are sponsored and qualify for these permanent residency visas. Some fill a growing need in the Catholic Church for those called to religious vocations. Others provide critical services to local communities in areas including religious education, and care for vulnerable populations such as the elderly, immigrants, refugees, abused and neglected children, adolescents and families at risk.
- Jewish congregations, particularly in remote areas with small Jewish communities, rely on rabbis, cantors, kosher butchers, Hebrew school teachers, and other religious workers who come from abroad through the religious worker program. Without them, many Jewish communities would be unable to sustain the institutions and practices that are essential to Jewish religious and communal life.
- Smaller religious communities rely on the visa, as well. For example, the vocation of members of the Bruderhof Communities, a religious communal order, requires a commitment to Christian brotherhood and fulltime devotion to a life of service. To sustain its communities and carry out its ministries that include the provision of emergency relief, housing assistance, food distribution, education, medical care, counseling and mediation, the order depends upon the ability afforded by the program to relocate non-clergy religious members from its locations overseas.
- Because there are no U.S.-based Hindu seminaries or religious training institutions, Hindu Americans depend almost entirely on religious workers from India to meet traditional worship, religious education, and religious service needs. Examples include

general and specialized priests, teachers of Hinduism, scriptural experts, translators, and master craftsmen who are trained to design and renovate temples according to ancient scriptural directives.

- Other religious denominations, such as United Methodist and Baptist churches, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Lutheran Church, the Church of Scientology, and the Seventh Day Adventist Church, also rely on the visas to bring in non-minister religious workers who, in addition to providing some of the services mentioned above, also work in areas as diverse as teaching in church schools, performing missionary work, translating and producing religious publications, sustaining prison ministries, and training health care professionals to provide religiously appropriate health care.

Because of the increasingly diverse ethnic makeup of our religious congregations and the nation as a whole, the special immigrant religious worker visa category is particularly important in addressing the specific pastoral and service-related needs of ethnic groups, including the Hispanic, Asian, and African communities. Special categories for non-minister religious workers are also necessary because religious organizations face obstacles in using traditional employment-related categories, which historically have not fit their unique situations.

A permanent extension would remove uncertainty from year-to-year and allow religious organizations, religious denominations, and the communities they serve to make critical hiring and staffing decisions without fear of the disruptions that come as the program edges close to expiration.

Thank you for your support of the Religious Worker Visa Program. We look forward to working with you to achieve a permanent extension of this program before it expires this year.

Sincerely,

Agudath Israel of America

American Jewish Committee

Bruderhof Communities

Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc. (CLINIC)

The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints

Church of Scientology International

Conference of Major Superiors of Men

The Episcopal Church

First Church of Christ, Scientist

The Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society (HIAS)

Hindu American Foundation

Jubilee Campaign USA, Inc.

Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service

Mennonite Central Committee U.S. Washington Office

National Association of Evangelicals

The Rabbinical Assembly

Union for Reform Judaism

United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society

U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops

World Relief