



Dear Senator:

We write to ask your support for H.R. 5570, legislation passed in the House of Representatives and introduced in the U.S. Senate that would extend a portion of the Religious Worker Visa program for another seven years. As you may know, you signed similar legislation extending the program in 2003.

Without congressional action this important program is set to expire on September 30, 2008.

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 Originally enacted with a sunset provision, it has enjoyed broad, bipartisan support in Congress and has been reauthorized four times since then.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 Church Communities International, a religious communal order, requires a commitment to Christian brotherhood and fulltime devotion to a life of service. To sustain its communities and affect 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.



- Other religious denominations, such as the United Methodist and Baptist churches, The First Church of Christ, Scientist, The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, the Lutheran Church, the Hindu temples across the United States, 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 same services mentioned above, also work in areas as diverse as teaching in church schools, performing missionary work, temple workers, 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. A special category for non-minister religious workers is also necessary because religious organizations face obstacles in using traditional employment immigration categories, which historically have not fit their unique situations.

As you may know, the religious community has long supported extending the Non-Minister Special Immigrant Religious Worker Program permanently. A permanent extension would remove uncertainty from year-to-year and allow religious organizations, religious denominations, and the communities that they serve to plan for the visas' use without fear of the disruptions that come as the program edges close to expiration. We note that, as introduced, H.R. 5570 would have permanently extended the program but that a compromise was reached in the Subcommittee that extends the program for either one year or seven years, depending on the issuance or non-issuance of regulations to reduce or eliminate instances of fraud in the program. The compromise reached in the House of Representatives also requires that the Department of Homeland Security Inspector General conduct a study and issue a report on the effectiveness of forthcoming regulations in ensuring that the program is being properly used.

We accept the compromise achieved in the House of Representatives and support H.R. 5570 as the House approved it. We believe that the House-approved measure represents a good faith effort to ensure that the program is used properly and that, especially when coupled with other steps that the Department has undertaken and is undertaking, the measure will ensure that the program is secure.

Thank you for your continuing support of the Religious Worker Visa Program and for your consideration of our concerns.

Respectfully,

Agudath Israel of America
American Jewish Committee
Catholic Legal Immigration Network, Inc.
Church Communities International
Church of Scientology International
Conference of Major Superiors of Men
Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society
Hindu American Foundation



Jubilee Campaign USA
Lutheran Immigration and Refugee Service
Mennonite Central Committee, United States
National Association of Evangelicals
National Spiritual Assembly of the Baha'is of the United States
The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints
The First Church of Christ, Scientist, Boston, MA
United Methodist Church, General Board of Church and Society
United Synagogue of Conservative Judaism
U.S. Conference of Catholic Bishops
World Relief