



EVANGELICAL IMMIGRATION table.

August 22, 2023

Dear Members of Congress,

We're writing to draw your attention to a situation that is creating significant challenges for churches who rely upon the Religious Worker Visa program. As a coalition of evangelical denominations and organizations, we urge you to quickly pass legislation to resolve this problem, which is inhibiting our ministries.

The Religious Worker Visa was created by Congress in 1990 to address a shortage of religious workers. Evangelical denominations and churches – along with religious institutions of other faith traditions – rely upon the program to ensure that we have pastors and other ministers who are lawfully present and authorized to work in roles that serve and grow our congregations. The program has been essential for accessing leaders with the linguistic and cultural skills needed to serve congregations composed largely of recently-arrived immigrants from various countries. At a time when many evangelical congregations and denominations are still recovering from the disruptions caused by the pandemic, immigrant congregations are often an exception, accounting for much of the growth in American evangelicalism in recent years.

Under the law, Religious Workers sponsored by a church or denomination are initially granted an R-1 non-immigrant visa, which allows them to minister for a maximum of five years if the initial visa is renewed. In many cases, the church or denomination will begin the process of applying for Lawful Permanent Resident status so that the religious worker will eventually be allowed to stay permanently in the United States.

The challenge facing churches and denominations is this: Religious Worker immigrant visas are categorized as EB-4 employment-sponsored visas, but the backlogs for EB-4 visas now reach nearly five years, which will require pastors on temporary R-1 visas no lawful option but to leave the country to await the process of their immigrant visas – and leave the churches they lead without pastors. This bureaucratic problem presents a significant hindrance to the practice of our religious faith, as our churches depend upon pastors who can be physically present to lead and minister to their congregations.



These backlogs are in significant part a result of the fact that another important visa category created by Congress, the Special Immigrant Juvenile (SIJ) visa for youth who have been abandoned, abused or neglected, is inexplicably categorized as an employer-sponsored immigrant visa under the EB-4 category. As the number of SIJ visa requests has grown in recent years, particularly from a few countries in Central America, the backlog has grown, and an [abrupt change](#) earlier this year in the way that the State Department processes SIJ visas from El Salvador, Honduras and Guatemala, in particular, has exacerbated this challenge.

The most obvious solution – in the interest of both uniquely vulnerable children who need the legal protections of the SIJ visa and of pastors and other religious workers and the congregations they lead that rely upon Religious Worker visas – would be to exempt SIJ visas from the numerical caps on EB-4 visas. Legislation was recently introduced to do this, for which we are thankful.

As evangelical Christians, we are concerned for the wellbeing of vulnerable foreign-born children, including those who have been orphaned or abandoned and thus are at elevated risks of exploitation, abuse and even human trafficking. We also, of course, want to continue to have vibrant local churches, which require qualified pastors and ministers who can lawfully minister to those with particular language and cultural backgrounds. A legislative fix exempting Special Immigrant Juvenile visas from the EB-4 visa category limits would serve both interests, and we urge you to pursue this change as quickly as possible.

Sincerely,

Evangelical Immigration Table Organizations:

Bethany Christian Services

Council for Christian Colleges and Universities

Ethics & Religious Liberty Commission of the Southern Baptist Convention

Faith and Community Empowerment

National Association of Evangelicals

National Latino Evangelical Coalition

The Wesleyan Church

World Relief