

What Happened to Religious Worker Green Cards?



By Eileen M. Martin

December 1, 2025 | **IMMIGRATION**

Religious worker green cards have become scarcer in the past several years, contributing to a crisis facing American religious communities as leaders are retiring and dying faster than they can be replaced.

One possible contribution to a solution could come from qualified religious leaders abroad, who may be willing to permanently relocate to the U.S. to fill these gaps. Employment-Based Fourth Preference (EB-4) is a classification that includes those who qualify for Lawful Permanent Residence in the United States based on religious worker or minister status. There is a limit on the number of approvals in the classification in total. There is also a per-country limitation placed on each employment classification, including EB-4. Up until 2016, the numbers available on an annual basis were sufficient for the demand — meaning that there were green cards and Immigrant Visas immediately available, without having to wait for the available numbers to replenish.

The demand for EB-4 inched up in the years leading up to 2023, when it exploded, such that the backlog is now approximately six years. Has the demand for Lawful Permanent Residence by religious workers and ministers exploded that much over so few years? The answer has complexities.

EB-4 is a classification that includes not only religious workers and ministers but also Special Immigrant Juveniles (SIJs). It is odd that these children, who are not coming to the U.S. to work, were placed into an employment-based classification by Congress. Due to the very large number of unaccompanied children who were admitted to the U.S. under the Biden administration, great stress was placed on the EB-4 classification, as those children filed for Lawful Permanent Residence. The stress started after 2016, with a few Central American nationalities seeing minor backlogs. Now every nationality is subjected to multi-year backlogs for both the children applying as SIJs but also for religious workers and ministers seeking Lawful Permanent Residence.

This situation has made the U.S. immigration landscape more challenging for religious workers and ministers, many of whom come to the U.S. in R-1 status as temporary nonimmigrants, who have a maximum of five years available to them in consecutive R-1 status. It has also caused concern for the religious organizations that employ the R-1s. While many R-1s and their employers would like the employment to become permanent, that will now only be possible if the R-1 leaves the U.S. for at least a year before returning as an R-1 again or as a Lawful Permanent Resident. Unlike in the past, it is now not possible for the R-1 employment to begin, and for the employer to petition for Lawful Permanent Residence for the R-1, and for the R-1 to keep working in the U.S. in R-1 status until the permanent status — or green card — is approved.

This issue has contributed to a crisis-level shortage of religious leaders in America. In fact, “American religious institutions are facing a crisis: they don’t have enough clergy to lead congregations, particularly in rural areas,” according to a report on NPR’s All Things Considered program on Nov. 25, 2024. The report specifically highlights that “clergy are retiring and dying faster than new ones are entering the ministry.” This makes the unavailability of visas for willing and able religious leaders and ministers outside the U.S. important to supporting American values and religious beliefs.

R-1 employers, R-1 workers, and their accompanying family members are in challenging situations. A religious worker or minister may be approved to pursue Lawful Permanent Residence but be stuck outside the U.S. for long periods of time while the backlog is reduced, or while waiting for the one year of residence abroad that will qualify him or her to obtain a new R-1 visa. This is disruptive to families of R-1 workers and ministers, some of whom may include school-aged children. It is also disruptive to R-1 employers who are trying to keep their religious organizations staffed.

It is hoped that the reduced numbers of Unaccompanied Children who are now entering the U.S. will ease the backlog of the EB-4 category, and the related stress on religious workers, ministers, and organizations. There is also a bill introduced to Congress in 2025, the Religious Workforce Protection Act (S.1298 and H.R.2672), which is designed to address challenges faced by religious workers in the United States created by the current significant immigration processing backlogs. The bill is currently referred to the Committee on the Judiciary, and is pending further action. In the meantime, experienced immigration counsel may be able to research alternative solutions to keep religious workers and ministers and their families in the U.S., supporting American religious institutions. If you have questions, Lippes Mathias LLP Immigration Team members Eileen M. Martin (emartin@lippes.com) and Elizabeth M. Klarin (eklarin@lippes.com) may be contacted regarding matters related to this topic and more.

This article was originally published by [Law360 Canada](#), part of LexisNexis Canada Inc.

The opinions expressed are those of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the author’s firm, its clients, LexisNexis Canada, Law360 Canada or any of its or their respective affiliates. This article is for general

information purposes and is not intended to be and should not be taken as legal advice.

Related Team



Eileen M. Martin

Partner | Team Co-
Leader - Immigration
| Team Leader -
Canada-U.S. Cross
Border



Elizabeth M. Klarin

Partner

Disclaimer: *The information in this post is provided for general informational purposes only, and may not reflect the current law in your jurisdiction. No information contained in this post should be construed as legal advice from our firm or the individual author, nor is it intended to be a substitute for legal counsel on any subject matter. No reader of this post should act or refrain from acting on the basis of any information included in, or accessible through, this post without seeking the appropriate legal or other professional advice on the particular facts and circumstances at issue from a lawyer licensed in the recipient's state, country or other appropriate licensing jurisdiction.*