

R-1 Non-Immigrant Religious Worker Visa

This visa is meant for someone coming temporarily to the United States as a religious worker. R-1 Nonimmigrant Religious Worker visas can include spouses and unmarried minor children in the same petition, but you cannot sponsor yourself. The religious denomination in the United States petitions for you. Among other requirements, you must have been a member of the faith or denomination for at least two years before they file a petition on your behalf.

An R-1 will NEVER get you a green card or lead to lawful permanent residency. This is a nonimmigrant, or temporary, visa.

R-1 Requirements

Eligible Nonimmigrant Religious Workers

There are three types of religious workers who may qualify for an R-1 Nonimmigrant visa:

1. Ordained ministers

Ordained ministers are duly trained and authorized by their religious denomination to conduct religious worship and other duties to the standards of its clergy. The law does not specify what training must be, but it has to be the same for all clergy within that denomination.

2. A professional working in a religious capacity

A professional working for a religious organization only qualifies for a religious

worker visa if the duties performed relate to the traditional functions of the religion and require intimate knowledge of that religion.

For example, an immigration lawyer working for the Archdiocese of Milwaukee could not get a religious visa as a professional worker because immigration attorneys do not have to know anything about the Roman Catholic faith to do their job. It wouldn't matter if that lawyer is a devout Roman Catholic or not. The same verdict would apply to Worsuch as accountants, janitors or office managers working for a religious organization because they do not need intimate knowledge of that religion or denomination to perform their work.

However, a canon lawyer who works only with the laws of the Roman Catholic Church, would be different. A canon lawyer fulfills many functions which are essential to the church and must understand the teachings of the church to do the job.

A word of caution though: you should not try to bypass regular business-based immigration with the easier religious based immigration just because you work for a religious institution.

3. Someone with a lifelong religious vocation

A person in a religious vocation has formally made a lifetime commitment through vows, investitures, ceremonies, or similar kinds of events to officially declare a religious way of life. The religious denomination must have a class of individuals whose lives are dedicated to religious practices and functions, as distinguished from the secular members of the religion. Examples of persons with a religious vocation include, but are not limited to, nuns, monks, and religious brothers and sisters.

STOP HERE:

If you do not fulfill any of these defined roles, you do not qualify for an R-1 nonimmigrant religious worker visa.

Work Requirements

1. You cannot sponsor yourself. The religious denomination in the United States petitions for you.

2. You must have been a member of the religious denomination or church who petitions for you for at least two years before the religious denomination or church files any petition for you as a religious worker.

3. You will have to work for an organization in the United States that the Internal Revenue Service recognizes as a religious organization and is exempt from paying federal income taxes.

If the organization itself is not exempt, it must at least be affiliated with an organization that the Internal Revenue Service has recognized as a religious organization and as exempt from paying federal income taxes.

4. The amount of work you perform must total at least 20 hours per week.

You can study, but it cannot be your full-time job. If you are going to study full-time, you should get a student visa, not an R-1 Nonimmigrant Religious Worker.

5. You cannot perform any secular work for additional income.

You are supposed to be paid for your religious work. The religious denomination will have to show that they have enough money to pay you. Some special rules apply to religious workers who have taken a vow of poverty. However, the petitioning religious denomination will have to prove that they have sufficient resources to financially support you. Regardless, you still cannot conduct any secular work for pay. Missionaries have a separate set of rules for this requirement.

Limitations of a Non-Immigrant Religious Worker

1. The maximum amount of time that you can stay in the United States as an R-1 nonimmigrant religious worker is five years.

If you want to stay longer than five years, you will have to find another nonimmigrant status or become a lawful permanent resident. At the end of five years you must leave the United States for at least one year before returning as an R-1 Nonimmigrant Religious Worker.

2. Again, the R-1 nonimmigrant religious worker will never get you a green card or lawful permanent residency. This nonimmigrant visa will never become an immigrant visa.

3. Your religious status is tied to the religious denomination which sponsored you. It is not yours independent of the religious denomination who petitioned for you.

This means you cannot move to another church, synagogue, or diocese without that new denomination or church filing a new petition for you. Also, you cannot change churches before that new petition is approved.

This is why it is better for an umbrella, or larger organization to petition for you than a smaller one. For example, if the Archdiocese of Milwaukee files for an R-1 Nonimmigrant Religious Worker petition, then that worker can work in any parish or ministry of the Archdiocese. However, if a parish petitions, then that person can work only at that single parish.

4. If you leave your religious worker job, the religious denomination or church who petitioned for you must inform Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) within fourteen days.

The religious denomination or church promises to do this when they petition for you. If you do not have some other status, you will then become deportable.

R-1 Application Process

Petitioning on Your Behalf

Your petitioning denomination or church will file a very long form on your behalf and pay a fee to Immigration. Afterwards, Immigration will send them a receipt with a unique receipt number.

Fraud Prevention

Immigration will also come to your denomination or church's place of business to make sure that it really is a religious denomination or church.

Immigration is very concerned about fraud, and they want to make sure that people merely posing as religious do not try to scam the system. They do not want people to spontaneously self-declare themselves a religion and then apply for all of their family members.

Information You'll Need

You will need to give your petitioning religious denomination or church some personal information. This is not a complete list, but you will need to at least provide the following items:

- A copy of your passport;
- Something to show that you are an ordained minister, in a lifelong vocation, or that you have the credentials to work in the professional capacity;
- Something to show that you have been a member of that denomination for at least two years;
- Your mailing address in your home country; and
- If you are already in the United States, they will need your most recent I-94 card printout.

Civil Documents by Country

The U.S. Department of State provides a list of acceptable documents on their website for each country that has a relationship with the United States. For example, if you are looking for what documents you need to prove a marriage, start by selecting your country and then scroll until you see the marriage certificate section. There you will find the documentation you need to give U.S. Immigration that is specific to your country. This resource can also be helpful if you need to find out how to get a copy of a divorce, birth, adoption, or death certificate from your home country.

Request for Evidence

Immigration may ask your petitioning denomination or church for more information through a Request for Evidence, or an RFE. This does not mean anything is wrong.

Sometimes Immigration asks for things that they already have or requests information that doesn't seem to be important. Catholic Charities Milwaukee once received a request for evidence asking, "What hours is the Roman Catholic Church open to the public?" We've also been asked for a list of every ministry of the Archdiocese along with its meeting schedule.

Approval Letter

Immigration will send an approval letter to your petitioning denomination or church. If you are already in the United States, perhaps as a student, you do not need to do anything else to become an R-1 nonimmigrant religious worker. If you are abroad and coming to the United States, you will have to take additional steps.

If you are coming in from abroad, you must check the United States consulate's instructions. You can find a complete list of U.S. consulates at the [embassy's website](#). You will find the instructions you need to get an appointment at the consulate. The information is fairly straightforward and easy to follow, but read the instructions carefully. Not every United States consulate issues every type of visa.

You will also need to complete a form, called a DS160, for the United States Department of State. You can find this form on [their website](#).

After You Have an R-1

Keep Both Your Visa and Your Status Current

This is complicated but **very important**. The religious denomination or church that files for you will get an approval notice which will state how long you can be in the United States as an R-1 religious worker. The denomination or church will then tell immigration how long they want you to work for them, up to a maximum of five years. Your first R-1 approval notice will be valid for as long as the denomination requests, but for no more than thirty months. **Even if your sponsor asks you to come for a full five years, your first R-1 nonimmigrant religious worker approval will be valid for only 30 months.**

If you are going to stay for more than thirty months, you will have to extend your R-1 status. Immigration must receive that extension **before your R-1 status expires**. It does not have to be approved before it expires, but the extension request must be received before your R-1 status (not your visa) expires.

Also, make sure that your passport is up to date. It should be valid for a minimum of 180 days after the date that you intend to enter the United States.

Traveling with an R-1

Travel can be a little tricky for religious workers. If you leave the United States during the term of your R-1 status, you will need a valid visa to re-enter. In other words, if your R-1 visa has expired you cannot use it to come back. Your supporting materials, such as an R-1 approval notice, will also have to be up-to-date while you renew your visa.

You should plan for at least four or five months to get an extension approved. Therefore, if you plan on extending your stay in the United States beyond your initial R-1 dates, start the extension process about six months before your visa expires. Family emergencies happen, and you do not want to be stuck without a way to travel back into the United States.

None of this information is meant to have you file any of the R-1 nonimmigrant religious worker forms yourself. Work with a good attorney to help you through these processes.

Pick the Right Sponsor

As previously mentioned, your status as a religious worker in the United States is tied to the religious denomination that sponsored you. Therefore, you cannot move to another denomination, church, synagogue, or diocese without them filing a new petition for you. Furthermore, you would not be able to move to that new organization before their new petition for you is approved. Again, this is why it's better for an umbrella, or larger organization to petition for you rather than a smaller one.

For example, if the Archdiocese of Milwaukee files for an R-1 Nonimmigrant Religious Worker, then that worker can work in any parish or ministry of the Archdiocese. However, if a parish petitions, then that person can work only at that single parish.

Frequently Asked Questions

Last updated on July 02, 2025.

How long will it take for my R-1 to get approved?

Expect the approval process to take at least five to six months once your sponsor submits the application on your behalf. You can check the current processing times at [USCIS.gov](https://uscis.gov). Make sure that you scroll down to the R-1 category and choose the

California Service Center. This will help you understand when you might be able to travel to the United States.

Is there a way to expedite my R-1 approval?

The R-1 allows for premium processing. As of 2019, it costs \$1225.00 but your R-1 will be done in 10 days rather than five months. Your employer can request it after they pass an on-site inspection at your future place of employment.

Will I have to spend any money to get my R-1?

The employer is required to pay all the mandatory fees for business-based immigration. That is not true, however, for religious-based immigration. There is no rule dictating who can pay for the fees associated with religious-based immigration. Ask your sponsor upfront what they expect you to pay for and what they plan to fund on your behalf.

How can I get a green card after coming to the U.S. with an R-1?

Your R-1 will never lead to a green card by itself. However, you can still apply for a green card as a religious worker through a different visa. Learn more on our Religious Green Card page.

Is it possible to lose my R-1?

The religious organization who petitioned for you can ask immigration to revoke your R-1 status. This sometimes happens if the employment does not work out or if the funding runs out.

What are some common mistakes people make when being sponsored for an R-1?

The biggest mistakes people tend to make when applying for an R-1 are:

- Leaving one employer and going to another without doing anything about their R-1 through their current employer. Work with a lawyer to have a new employer petition for a new R-1 on your behalf.
- Traveling out of the United States without a way to renew their visa so that they can come back to the United States.
- Staying longer than five years.
- Listening to rumors. Don't ask a friend or colleague how to do this or what to expect. Every case is different. If something goes wrong it may not be your fault, but it certainly will be your problem.

Family concerns?

R-1's allow for spouses and children to accompany the religious worker. The forms are a little different, but many of the concerns are the same. To qualify as derivatives, your children must be unmarried and under the age of 21. If they get married or turn 21, they will have to apply for their own status in the United States.

You should know that if you lose your R-1 status, your spouse and children will also lose their status. The attention to keeping visas and status current also applies to the spouses and children of R-1 religious workers.

[Options for Status, Visas, Permits & Papers Immigration](#)

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