

# Missionary Visa

All religious worker visas allow people to come to the United States and perform good works associated with various faith-based groups. However, unlike the R-1 and the Special Immigrant Religious Worker, the Missionary visa doesn't require you to be an ordained minister, someone in a lifelong vocation, or someone working in a professional capacity. Rather, the requirements of the Missionary visa are based on the kind of work you will do.

**You cannot get a Missionary visa if you are already in the United States unlawfully.** But, if you are here lawfully and want to change statuses, you can become a missionary as long as you fulfill the requirements.

## Missionary Definitions

### Who is a Missionary?

The United States Department of State defines a missionary as someone who is:

- **entering the United States temporarily;**
- **a member of a religious denomination, whether they are ordained or not;** and
- **performing missionary work on behalf of a denomination,** as long as the work does not involve asking for or accepting donations. This includes selling anything as an exchange for a donation. Additionally the minister must not receive a salary or payment from someone in the United States other than their allowance or reimbursement for expenses related to their temporary stay.

### What is Missionary Work?

To come to the United States as a missionary, the U.S. Department of State defines "missionary work" as work that may include:

- Religious instruction;
- Aid to the elderly or needy; or
- Converting people to the church's religion

Missionary work **does not include** ordinary administrative work. The church cannot hire missionaries as replacement labor for typical work.

A missionary can also work within a voluntary service program. A voluntary service program is an organized project conducted by a recognized nonprofit or religious charitable organization (1) to assist the poor or the needy or (2) to further a religious or charitable cause. However, the program may not involve requesting, accepting, or selling anything for donations.

## **Advantages of the Missionary Visa**

### **Greater Flexibility**

The Missionary visa offers more flexibility than other nonimmigrant visas because it includes a wider of qualifying work. Acceptable forms of missionary work include, but are not limited to:

- working in a food pantry;
- tutoring children in a faith-based school;
- working in an adult day center with low-income clients; or chaplaincy work.

The distinction between missionaries and other types of workers is that their work must specifically relate to what we often think of as the good works of the church. This means that your missionary work could not be as an accountant for a parish, or as a parish secretary, because those tasks aren't directly fulfilling the organization's religious mission.

However, as long as your work qualifies as good works of the church, it can be in any setting connected to your sponsoring church or denomination. For example, faith-based schools, hospitals, and many religious charities use the Missionary visa to bring employees to the United States.

### **Unlimited Renewals**

The other big advantage of the Missionary visa is that **you can extend a Missionary status indefinitely**. Immigration usually grants missionary status for one year increments, so you have to stay on top of your status expiration dates to make sure that you renew it in time.

## **Disadvantages of the Missionary Visa**

### **It Will Never Become a Green Card**

**The missionary visa or status will never convert into lawful permanent residency or a green card.** You can have a missionary status for years, but it will not be enough to get an immigrant visa.

### **Limited Salary**

You cannot earn a full salary as a missionary, but you can receive something called full care and maintenance, and/or a stipend. Immigration wants to make sure you have food, a place to sleep and enough to live on. However, missionary work is not designed to be a career move to make extra money.

### **Limited Mobility**

As a missionary, you are tied to a sponsoring church or denomination. If you want to leave your sponsor for a new one, you also must change your Missionary status with Immigration.

## **Warnings**

### **Remember These Rules Before You Apply**

- You may NOT sell religious articles as a missionary. Denominations have gotten into a lot of trouble by sending people to sell Bibles door-to-door, which you are strictly forbidden as a missionary.
- If you are already in the United States unlawfully, you cannot change to a missionary status.

These rules can be just as confusing as any aspect of immigration, which is why it is so important that you find competent legal representation.

## Application Process

### If You're Already in the United States Lawfully

First, you pay the fees and fill out an immigration form (I-539), which can be completed online. You will also submit a very detailed letter from your sponsoring denomination that explains what work you will do and how you will be paid. Additionally, Immigration now requires that people applying for missionary status have a biometrics appointment at which immigration will take your digital fingerprint and scan a photo of your face. If you have questions about this, read our [Biometrics Appointment](#) article.

You can check the status of your application online at [USCIS.gov's processing times page](#). While you wait, Immigration may ask for more information, so consistently check your mail in case you receive any requests. Once you have an approval, make sure that you check the approval dates! You must apply to renew a missionary status before your current missionary status expires.

### If You're Outside the United States

Make sure you apply for the correct visa. If you apply for your missionary visa from abroad, apply for a B-1 tourist visa. There is a B1 and a B2, but **make sure you apply for the B1**.

You will need to follow a set of instructions specific to the U.S. consulate in your home country. You can find a complete list of U.S. consulates and their contact information at [usembassy.gov](#). Among other tasks, you will need to complete a form for the United States Department of State called a [DS160](#). You will also need to schedule an appointment at the consulate for an interview and to have your fingerprints taken.

If your B-1 visa is approved, you will enter the United States with a tourist visa. The letter from your sponsoring denomination will grant you access for up to one year. Customs and Border Protection will stamp your passport. Usually, you will be given permission to be inside of the United States for one year.

Once you enter the United States, you will need to go on the internet and print out an I-94 card. You can find this on the [U.S. Department of Homeland Security's website](#). Pay very close attention to the date your status expires according to your I-94 card. You must apply to extend your missionary status before your most recent I-94 card expires.

Note: Not every United States consulate issues every type of visa. If your consulate does not offer the visa you need, their website should refer you to a different consulate that can help you instead.

## Letter from Your Sponsor

Whether you apply from outside or within the United States, your denomination needs to send a detailed letter about how they will sponsor you. The letter should be signed and presented on the denomination's letterhead. Your denomination must tell Immigration exactly what kind of work you will do and what financial arrangements are in place so that you do not have to look for compensation in addition to your missionary work. They should specify how much money you will receive as a stipend, or how much they will give you for full care and maintenance. The letter should also state where you will live and where you will work.

**Remember:** Please remember that you will have a **visa** and a **status**. They are very different things. Your **visa** is issued by the United States Department of State for the sole purpose of allowing you to try to come to the United States. Whereas, your **status** is your relationship to the United States, which you will keep track of by printing your I-94 card.

You can only travel during the dates on which your visa is valid. **However, you can only be inside of the United States during the valid dates on your I-94 or when the extension of your status is pending.** Keep close track of both sets of dates, but be especially careful that you do not go out of status!

## Frequently Asked Questions

Last updated on July 09, 2025.

What are some common mistakes people make when applying for the Missionary visa?

The biggest mistake people tend to make when they apply for a Missionary visa is not choosing work that is traditionally associated with the good works of the church. For example, if Catholic Charities' Adult Daycare Center needed someone to help with book keeping, that would not qualify as missionary work because accounting is not one of the good works associated with the church.

However, if Catholic Charities Adult Daycare needed someone to help care for older adults by feeding them, bathing them, and arranging activities for them, that would qualify as missionary work because those duties are good works traditionally associated with the church.

Who pays for my application?

Either you or the religious denomination can pay the expenses. Discuss these details with your petitioner so you know you are on the same page.

Is it possible to lose my Missionary visa?

Yes, your religious denomination can write to Immigration and withdraw sponsorship.

How do I get my I-94?

Your I-94 card displays your status in the United States. You used to get these when you entered the country, but now you must go online and print them yourself.

Go to the [Department of Homeland Security's website](#) to find the I-94 card application. To complete it, you will need information from your passport.

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