



# Applying for Visas

(Updated, December 4, 2009)

Uniting General Council  
World Communion of Reformed Churches  
June 18-28, 2010

As you prepare to attend the Uniting General Council, among the questions you must ask is: **Do I need a visa?** Please read the following carefully to see what applies to you.

Most foreign visitors will have to apply for the B-1 Visitor Visa, also called a Business B-1 Visitor Visa. Before you go to ask for a visa, please note that 35 countries are recognized by the US government as part of the Visa Waiver Program. First, we will review that program, and then turn to the visa requirements.

## I. The Visa Waiver Program for travelers to the United States

Citizens from countries in this program **do not need a visa**. People from these countries may be admitted to the United States for 90 days without a visa. The following countries are currently in the program:

Andorra, Australia, Austria, Belgium, Brunei, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Japan, Latvia, Liechtenstein, Lithuania, Luxembourg, Malta, Monaco, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Norway, Portugal, San Marino, Singapore, Slovakia, Slovenia, South Korea, Spain, Sweden, Switzerland, and the United Kingdom\*.

*\*United Kingdom Passports: Only United Kingdom passports notated with “British Citizens” and/or “with unrestricted right of abode in the United Kingdom” are eligible for VWP admission. Holders of passports indicating that the bearer is a British Subject, British Dependent Territories Citizen, British Overseas Citizen or British National (Overseas) do **not** qualify for VWP travel and will have to apply for a visa.*

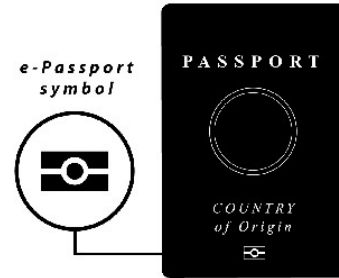
Citizens of Canada also do not need a visa, but are required to prove both identity and citizenship. A Passport is advised, but a birth certificate or a citizenship certificate may be used. Official identification with a photo is required, such as a passport or driver’s license. Arrivals by public transport (plane, train or bus) usually require more documentation, the passport, than arrivals by private car.

**PLEASE NOTE:** Even if you are from a country in the Visa Waiver Program, you must still complete an online application under the terms of the **Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA)**. See below.

## Passports

Passports from countries in the Visa Waiver Program should be machine-readable. Most passports issued after 2004 are machine-readable, but you should check. If your machine-readable passport was issued between 26 Oct 2005 and 25 Oct 2006, your passport must have a digital photograph (one imprinted on the page) or an integrated chip – the e-passport. Passports issued after 26 Oct 2006 are required to be e-passports.

Travelers from the Czech Republic, Estonia, Hungary, Latvia, Lithuania, Malta, Slovak Republic and South Korea **must have an e-passport**, no matter what date the passport was issued. If you do not have an e-passport, you will have to apply for a visa. An e-passport has a unique international symbol on the front →



The general rule is that passports should be valid at least six months from the date of entry. However, there is also a provision that passports from countries in the Visa Waiver Program must be valid for at least 90 days from the time of entry, in addition to the six months, since you are eligible for a 90-day stay without a visa. Therefore, **your passport should be valid until April 2011**. If in doubt, you may check with the nearest US consulate, but we have heard some consuls do not think the six-month requirement applies to those in the Visa Waiver Program.

## Electronic System for Travel Authorization (ESTA) -- New in 2009!

All travelers from countries in the Visa Waiver Program must now complete an online application. The United States Department of Home Security recommends you do this at least 72 hours before your departure. Eventually, this electronic authorization will replace the paper form, I-94, that you fill out on the airplane en route to the United States. For now, you may still have to fill out the paper form as well.

Go to <https://esta.cbp.dhs.gov> to complete the ESTA. Multiple languages are available there. Typically, after completing the form, approval is given within a few seconds, or further instructions will be given. An approval for travel is valid for up to two years and multiple entries into the United States, so you may do this as soon as you know your travel plans. You can even do it today!

If you fail to apply for ESTA, you might not be allowed on your flight, or experience other unnecessary trouble and delay!

Although not required, we advise that you print a copy of the ESTA approval and carry it with you. It is supposed to be transmitted to the airlines, but it is better to be safe.

## II. The Business B-1 Visitor Visa

For those who live in other countries not covered by the Visa Waiver Program, you will need to apply for a visa. The procedure for applying for a visa is different according to the country. In a few places, you will be able to apply by mail, but in most countries, you must have an

interview at the US consulate or embassy. You will probably need an appointment for that interview.

If you have a multiple entry visa, please check to see that it is valid past your date of entry.

### **When Should I begin?**

Generally, you should seek a visa, that is, have your interview, between six months and three months before you leave, in the period December 18, 2009 – February 2010. A few countries may have long waiting periods to get an interview scheduled. Most embassies now schedule interviews online, and you should check early. In some cases, if you check in June or July 2009, you may be able to schedule your interview in the proper period, December 18, 2009-February 2010.

If you are younger, be sure to get started on time, so that we can help if possible.

You should inquire among friends, travel agents, and from the embassy itself about the time needed. If you interview and apply too early, the consul may tell you to come back in six months.

### **The Interview**

Every consul officer must presume that when you come before him or her, you are intending to stay in the US. You must show him or her that you intend to return. Be direct about the purpose of your visit; do not try to hide anything.

The four key issues that the consul officer will look for will be:

1. Bank Account – do you have one and how much is in it?
2. Home – do you own one?
3. Job – prove that you have a job
4. Family – do you have family at home that you would return to?

### **What do I need to bring to the interview?**

- Every applicant will have to complete **an application form**, Form DS-156. We advise young people also to complete a DS-157. Photos may be required.
- The Reformed Ecumenical Council will supply **an appropriate invitation letter**. If you are not requesting travel subsidy, we will send an invitation letter after June 1, if your registration form has been received. If you are requesting travel subsidy, we shall wait until we decide on the subsidy request before sending a letter.
- The **WCRC Uniting General Council** will be registered as a conference with the United States State Department. If you have completed your registration and received an invitation letter from us, your name will appear on that list, which can be accessed

by every US Embassy. Details will also be stated in the invitation letter. Be sure to **tell the consular officer that your name is on this list.**

- Your **passport must be valid for at least six months** after the date of entry into the United States. For safety, we advise that you have a passport valid until January 2011. If yours expires before January 2011, renew it now.
- You should bring a **proposed travel itinerary**. However, a purchased ticket is not necessary, and we advise that you **do not purchase a non-refundable ticket until the visa is approved**. Most low-cost tickets are non-refundable, so be cautious about when you purchase.
- If you are employed, a **letter from your employer** may help. It should specify that you have been employed and that you will have a job waiting for you when you return. If you are a student at a university, get a similar letter from the university.
- If you are married and have a family, bring evidence along with you, such as **marriage and birth certificates**.
- You should be able to explain **how your travel will be funded**. In cases where the REC and the WARC offer some subsidy, this will be explained in the invitation letter. If family and friends have helped you to raise travel funds, you may explain that, suggesting that you will return to share with them what you learn at this event.
- If you or an immediate family member has traveled previously and returned, bring **some evidence** with you. This may be in your passport already.
- In addition, you may want to have a **document, such as a bank statement**, showing your available funds. If you own property, take a **title deed** with you.
- If you do not own your home, bring along **some government document** with your address to show that you have a permanent residence.
- And bring **money for the visa fee** with you.

Remember, you have to persuade the interviewing officer that you will indeed return to your own country after the meeting is over. This may apply especially to younger persons, persons who have only a little work experience, or who are unmarried. Be prepared to explain why your church chose you to go to this meeting, or why you have chosen to attend.

If your visa is denied, or if you are required to provide additional documentation that we might be able to supply, please contact the UGC Coordinator. We will try to help, although our influence is limited.

Richard van Houten  
2050 Breton Rd. SE, Ste 102  
Grand Rapids, MI 49546  
USA

Tel/Fax: +1 (616) 949-2910  
Email: rvh@recweb.org