

FAQs for UMC Parental Leave

Created May 2024

Note: These are general answers and should be contextualized to each annual

Q. How much will this cost?

This varies by annual conference. You will need to estimate the yearly cost to your annual conference. The way to do this is to multiply the number of people taking leave¹ by the estimated cost per leave.

To calculate the estimated cost per leave, you can ask clergy who were recently on leave how much their coverage cost. In the absence of that number, figure out the average preaching supply rate in your conference (generally \$50-\$250 per week) and the pastoral care supply rate (varies – the conference officials who deal with emergency medical supply coverage could help with this number).

Note that you are NOT funding the pastor's salary. The local church continues to pay the pastor's salary, just like they always do! Instead, what you need to do is figure out the average cost for *coverage*. This means the added costs of worship leadership, interim ministry, pastoral care, and administration while the appointed person is away.

Example from East Ohio:

In their context, retired clergy doing short term medical supply would typically be paid a range of \$1000-\$2500/ month, depending on duties expected. Lorrin Radzik, who co-authored the legislation, became the first person to utilize the new policy. **Her congregation's grant request was \$2,750.** This covered the entirety of pastoral care for 14 weeks (since she added a vacation week to her 13 weeks) as well as 5 weeks of preaching/worship leadership supply. The remaining preaching weeks were covered by conference staff serving in extension ministry, and in East Ohio, that is a part of their roles, so there was no cost for that.

Upper Limit:

¹ The Conference Secretary and Assistant to the Bishop may be able to help calculate this. Base it on the average for preceding years.

While the Model Legislation says a maximum of \$10,000 per leave, this is a deliberately high number to cover special circumstances. For example, if the pastor usually does all of the church's social media and bulletins and audio-visual tech, then the church may need to hire someone to cover those administrative things. But each church will submit a *plan* for coverage, along with the cost, and the conference has the opportunity to make sure that the plan passes the "sniff test." **The \$10,000 is an upper limit, not a guaranteed amount.**

FMLA Considerations:

If your state has expanded FMLA, be sure to include how that affects the bottom line for churches.

Q. How will we fund this?

This will vary by conference. See [Steps in Parental Leave Organizing](#).

Q. How is the money disbursed?

This policy requires the church requesting funds to write a plan for coverage. This provides accountability for use of the funds. The local church then receives a check from the Conference to cover the total cost. The local church disseminates it as appropriate (e.g., to each preacher who covers worship or the person who does pastoral care).

Q: How does this relate to the Family & Medical Leave Act (FMLA)?

Parental leave rights in the United States are lumped into a federal law called "The Family and Medical Leave Act" (FMLA). FMLA has limited reach because it only applies to "public agencies" and "private sector employers with 50 or more employees."² According to the U.S. Department of Labor, "The FMLA entitles eligible employees of covered employers to take **unpaid, job-protected leave** for specified **family and medical reasons**,"³ including birth, adoption, or fostering placement. Unpaid FMLA leave lasts for up to 12 weeks. If the employer agrees, parental leave can be intermittent or on a reduced schedule.⁴ While taking FMLA leave, the employee is protected from retaliation and can continue group health benefits. FMLA job protections include the right to "Return to work at the same *or* virtually identical job at the end of the leave period," although there are "Limitations on Restoration"

² <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/fmla/FMLA-PowerPoint.pdf>

³ <https://www.dol.gov/agencies/whd/fmla>

⁴ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/fmla/FMLA-PowerPoint.pdf>

to your previous job such as “Employment changes, such as a layoff or reduced hours, which would have occurred without FMLA leave.”⁵

In short, FMLA is inadequate because it is unpaid and only covers some workers.

The Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) allows for job protection; however, there are limits to who this law applies to, and it does not mandate that leave be paid. For many families, if their parental leave is not paid, then it is not an option.

In recognition of how inadequate the federal law is, multiple states have passed state-specific FMLA laws. These vary, but some of them do include *paid* leave and most of them expand who is eligible for leave.

Some United Methodists are fortunate enough to live in a state with an expanded FMLA program. But that’s not true across the country. The church should be doing all we can to improve both state and national access to parental leave. We need to push as a denomination for the USA to upgrade the FMLA. In the meantime, we can model a positive approach to paid parental leave. We have the opportunity to be prophetic leaders in showing this country that there is another way to care for families.

Q. Why can’t we just use the *Book of Discipline*?

The parental leave policy in the *Book of Discipline*⁶ only guarantees paid leave for eight weeks, has been considered open to interpretation, and has not always applied equitably across the connection, since “one-fourth of year” is thirteen weeks.

Some annual conferences have adopted policies maintaining compensation for thirteen weeks and assisting local congregations in paying for coverage during the leave.

There are huge disparities in how United Methodist clergy experience parental leave. The differences vary wildly according to your gender, your race, your local church, and your annual conference. For example, small churches might want to support the pastor on leave, but they also really need that pastor back. Financially struggling churches are faced with extra expenses that make it difficult for them to support the pastor — even if they want to.

Non-traditional clergy struggle to find other people to replace them. For instance, church planters end up running social media for the new church start even though they’re technically on leave.

⁵ <https://www.dol.gov/sites/dolgov/files/WHD/fmla/FMLA-PowerPoint.pdf>

⁶ The 2016 United Methodist *Book of Discipline*, ¶ 355.

While the BOD might guarantee clergy better than a lot of secular employment does, it's still a huge gap in actually supporting families according to our UMC values.

When the UMC first instituted an eight-week paid “maternity and paternity” leave policy, we were trail-blazing a path among mainline denominations. But over the last thirty years, other denominations have leap-frogged over the UMC in terms of what they provide for their clergy. The Presbyterian Church in the USA, for example, guarantees twelve weeks of paid parental leave. It’s time for the UMC to re-look at our parental leave policy for the next generation.

Clergy are currently stigmatized for taking leave. Pushback from local congregations is a barrier for clergy requesting parental leave. Clergymen are afraid of retaliation so they take zero time off. Clergywomen then face even *more* resistance because their male colleagues aren’t taking their leave.

Q. Is “parental leave” different from “maternity” or “paternity” leave?

“Parental Leave” is an inclusive, gender-neutral term for leave after birth or adoption. It includes both Maternity and Paternity Leave. “Maternity leave” is for women’s leave after birth or adoption. “Paternity leave” is for men’s leave after a child enters their family.

Q. Why “parental leave” and not “family leave”?

This legislation focuses on the more narrow topic of parental leave and not the expanded topic of family leave. Family Leave *includes* parental leave but it is not limited to that. Family Leave also includes caring for a seriously ill loved one, like a parent, spouse, or sibling.

This legislation has a narrower focus partly for expediency, since the conferences that have already passed quality parental leave legislation were able to do so by deliberately keeping their focus narrow. It may be easier to add this type of leave to an existing parental leave policy than it will be to push for an annual conference to adopt a broader policy at first.

It is easier to define and predict *parental leave* than *family leave* — for the simple reason that it’s obvious when a child enters a home. There are also fewer cases of parental leave each year than you would likely find with family leave.

In addition, the UMC already has something called “Family Leave,” which is a Voluntary Leave of Absence (LOA).⁷ This means it changes the conference relationship. It generally lasts at least a year — frequently longer. Only a handful of annual conferences currently have a *short-term* version of paid “family” leave — that is, an opportunity for clergy to *temporarily* take paid time off to care for a loved one *without* triggering a change in conference status.

In the future, an expanded family leave policy that includes temporary care of an immediate family member, like an aging parent, will be important to address on the denominational level. Family Leave is crucial for future advocacy since women are frequently family caregivers.

Q. Why does this not include “medical leave”?

Another type of leave that is sometimes discussed with Parental Leave is “medical leave” / “sick leave.” Like the “family leave” described above, the *Book of Discipline* addresses “medical leave” for long-term situations.⁸ Conferences vary greatly in how they approach short-term medical needs.

We have seen that as conferences expand Parental Leave, they may also be inspired to expand their care for clergy with short-term medical needs. This happened, for example, in the Illinois-Great Rivers Annual Conference, where the Young Adult Team requested funding for parental leave, and the Board of Ordained Ministry was inspired to create a matching funding mechanism for short-term medical issues. This is great, and you may want to consider this in your context.

Some areas are able to stack short-term medical leave and parental leave. For example, in the state of New York, short-term medical leave is available for birthing parents and then this is followed by family leave for the purpose of bonding with a child.

Q. Does this mean that all clergy are required to take 13 weeks?

No one is required to take 13 weeks. This just gives parents the option. This is particularly needed for children in NICU and with other medical crises.

⁷ See 2016 *Book of Discipline* ¶ 354

⁸ See 2016 *Book of Discipline* ¶ 356

Q. Why should the annual conference provide funding for coverage?

This provides equity across appointments. Congregations have unequal access to resources, and, while most local churches want to be supportive of new parents, the fact is that finances are a barrier. Many small churches can't afford to pay both their pastor on leave and the people who are covering for the pastor. Of course they're going to want to limit this to eight weeks!

When local churches have to bear the full cost of parental leave, they are more likely to challenge clergy seeking to take their leave.⁹ If we shift the funding from the local church to an annual conference source, then men are more likely to request leave from their local congregation, and the local congregation is less likely to complain. (Women also endure those local congregation complaints, but are less likely to capitulate to them.)

This covers clergy in conference-funded extension ministry. The annual conferences need a funding mechanism so that they're not just relying on local churches (case in point: church planting).

A conference-funded paid parental leave policy benefits small churches, church plants, and churches in struggling economic areas. Currently, parental leave is hard on small churches that don't have multiple pastors on staff. It could be handled on a conference level to make them fair throughout the conference and no matter what size church you serve so that all pastors have the same benefits.

This benefits the whole annual conference. Paid parental leave strengthens clergy well-being and improves morale, recruitment, and retention. Paid parental leave attracts and retains talented young clergy. By strengthening the physical and mental well-being of clergy parents, we prevent clergy burn-out and improve clergy morale. Research on churches shows that conference-level parental leave policies improve pastors' relationships with their congregations.¹⁰ Clergywomen with positive parental leave experiences are less likely to leave parish ministry.¹¹

Q. Does this apply to deacons?

⁹ Sharp, E.C., Huebner, A.J. Clergywomen and Role Management: A Study of Clergywomen Negotiating Maternity Leave. *Pastoral Psychol* **63**, 147–170 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-013-0539-3>

¹⁰ Sharp, E.C., Huebner, A.J. Clergywomen and Role Management: A Study of Clergywomen Negotiating Maternity Leave. *Pastoral Psychol* **63**, 147–170 (2014). <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11089-013-0539-3>

¹¹ [Delivering care for pastors who are also new parents | Faith and Leadership](#)

This policy applies to all clergy, regardless of their part-time or full-time status. In this policy, “clergy” means any local pastor, provisional member, associate member, or clergy member in full connection who is appointed to a local congregation or annual conference-funded extension ministry, including but not limited to conference and district positions, and conference staff. Clergy appointed to non-conference-funded extension ministries are encouraged to adapt similar policies for their settings.

Q. Why doesn't this address lay staff?

While this policy is not able to mandate how local churches treat lay staff, the legislation does encourage just and equitable treatment. In the words of the policy: “Churches and other ministry settings will also examine their personnel policies for lay staff and are encouraged to ensure adequate and equal parental leave for all.”

Q: What will we do with our pastor gone for so long?

First, the “people called Methodist” have always been a lay-led movement. This is a wonderful opportunity for local church leaders to continue in mission and ministry without creating dependence on a pastor.

Second, we are a connectional church. Some congregations will choose to have a variety of lay and clergy step into the pulpit during this time. Retired clergy and other clergy not currently serving in a local church can fill the pulpit and pastoral needs.

Q: Does this go far enough?

This legislation is one part of addressing “culture change” issues and instituting best practices across the connection.