

UMC parental leave generous by U.S. standards, but less than that offered in other countries

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The U.S. is one of the only industrialized nations that does not offer guaranteed paid maternity or paternity leave.

Government Policies on Guaranteed Paid Parental Leave			
Location	Length of Time	% Salary	Duration paid
England	280 days	90%*	280 days*
Iceland	90 days	80%	90 days
Russia	140 days	min wage minimum	140 days
China	98 days	100%	98 days
Saudi Arabia	70 days	50 or 100%	10 weeks
United States	0 days	0%	0
California	6 weeks	55%	6 weeks
New Jersey	6 weeks	67%	6 weeks

*England offers 90% salary for the first 6 weeks of leave, the remainder is paid at a flat rate of £137/week or 90% of the employee's salary, whichever is less.

American maternity leave

The U.S. doesn't have a federal policy regarding parental leave at all. The closest it has is The Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 that gives all public and private sector employees -- of both genders -- whose employers have 50 or more workers the right to 12 weeks of job-protected unpaid family or medical leave, assuming they meet certain mandated conditions about length of employment. This Act covers [barely half of all workers and less than a fifth of new mothers](#) (page 1).

Looking at individual state policies doesn't offer much hope, either. Only two states offer paid maternity leave at the moment: California (Paid Family Leave) and New Jersey (Paid Family Insurance). Each program is bankrolled on the payroll tax by employees and is available almost universally for their residents. Washington state also has a program in place, but it has been postponed by funding difficulties resulting from the recession.

Before California FLP and New Jersey FLI were instated, many employers had concerns about the effect parental leave would have on their businesses, suggesting it would be too costly and could impede on profits and productivity. A study on the effects of these policies, released six years later, found that these concerns were unfounded and in fact many businesses saved money because they didn't have to train new hires or pay other employee turnover costs. In addition, providing paid family leave lengthened the amount of time men took to stay at home with a new child as well as the amount of time a woman chose to breastfeed her new child (page 29).

What does maternity leave look like for employees of the UMC?

The Parental Leave policy for clergy according to the 2012 Book of Discipline (§356):

Maternity or paternity leave, not to exceed one fourth of a year, will be available and shall be granted by the bishop and the cabinet, and the executive committee of the Board of Ordained Ministry to any local pastor, provisional member, associate member, or clergy member in full connection who so requests it at the birth or arrival of a child into the home for purposes of adoption.

1. Persons desiring maternity or paternity leave should file their request with the committee on pastor-parish relations after consulting with the district superintendent at least 90 days prior to its beginning to allow adequate pastoral care for the churches involved to be developed.
2. During the leave, the clergy member's annual conference relations will remain unchanged, and the health and welfare benefit plans will remain in force.
3. A maternity or paternity leave of up to one quarter of a year will be considered as an uninterrupted appointment for pension purposes.
4. Compensation will be maintained for no less than the first eight weeks of leave.
5. During the leave time, pastoral responsibility for the church or churches involved will be handled through consultation with the committee on pastor-parish relations of the local church(es) and the district superintendent.
6. Special arrangements shall be made for district superintendents, bishops, and those under special appointment.

This is a very generous policy by U.S. standards. Maternity leave is becoming more and more available across both the private and non-profit sectors, but many of these employees don't take advantage of it. Many express worry that their employers will retaliate, either by not guaranteeing their positions upon their return or by finding other reasons to let them go.

These anxieties are also true in The UMC. The General Commission on the Status and Role of Women has fielded multiple phone calls on these very issues. Women may be afraid to take advantage of their leave if they are at an early stage in their career, serving in a small church or serving as a church's sole

pastor or first woman pastor – conditions not uncommon for women of child-bearing age. What if the pastor has more than one charge? If the church staff is small, who will be visiting members in the hospital, planning worship or preaching on Sundays while the pastor is out? Many women are often unaware about the leaves available to them in the first place, and their church's staff-parish relations committee might not have ever dealt with a pastor wanting to take parental leave and might be resistant; some have commented that they never had to provide such leave for previous (male) pastors.

General agencies of the UMC

Paid maternity leave for employees of UMC general agencies was introduced just three years ago. This is a first positive step forward for our women employees. The women who took advantage of the program were very grateful for the days they had to bond with their newborn.

The General Agencies of The United Methodist Church maternity leave policy is as follows:

The General Church Agency will provide leave for newborn or adoption childcare leave in the amount of 18 days. Any time taken beyond the 18 days of newborn/adoption childcare leave in conjunction with a birth or adoption shall be charged against accumulated Category A sick leave, vacation or shall be without pay.

Discussion:

In a month when mothers are honored with flowers, cards, and chocolate, let's remember that we as a church can celebrate our new moms with more than nice gestures by providing them the systemic support they need to care for their families.

- If you're a pastor, did you ever take parental leave? If you have a staff, what policies were in place for staff who were new parents? Did you or other employees take all the leave that was available to you? How did your church handle it?
- If you're a layperson in a local church, have you ever had a pastor request parental leave? How did the church handle the pastor's absence? How did you and the church support the new parent?
- If you work outside of the church, what does parental leave look like in your context? Has it been beneficial?

Father's day is also fast approaching. Let's continue to support new fathers in June by encouraging them to take advantage of the parental leave policies available to them.

If you want to respond to these discussion questions, or if you have an idea for an article or research, email [Erin Kane](#), our director of research and monitoring.