

Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
Guidelines for a Family Leave Policy
Guidelines adopted by the Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod Council, 3/20/2021

Background

The issue of family leave policy and practice has become an important one in recent years. The questions of “who should receive leave?” and “for what purposes?” have become complicated as both parents in many families have joined the work force. In addition, the list of situations for which leave is necessary has grown.

This Synod is concerned for its congregations as well as its Pastors and Deacons. Synod Council decided to explore the issue of family leaves to determine a fair and reasonable policy. In May 1993, the Synod Council asked the Committee on Ministry to study the issue, and to bring response to a Synod Council meeting for discussion. Guidelines were adopted by the 1994 Synod Assembly. In 2021 the Synod Ministry Committee gathered information on policies in synods across the ELCA and recommended the following changes.

General Statements Concerning Leave Policy Included In This Report

The Church should include benefits for its called personnel comparable to those of other professionals. However, the Church should not be bound by or confined to the limitations or scope of the policies of other organizations. Therefore, although the decisions contained in these guidelines reflect the general environment of Family and Medical Leave Policy, they are not merely copies of some other policy. Instead, they provide policy that will benefit both the called person and the congregation or affiliated agency.

It is the hope that in all matters of Leave, the called person, and congregation or affiliated agency will work together to determine the level of need and a reasonable response. It is hoped that all issues of policy will be approached in the love and care for each other that reflects whose we are.

The policy suggested by this report assumes full-time employment. Part-time benefits will be adjusted according to each given situation in a manner acceptable by both the called person and the congregation or affiliated agency.

Definitions

Called Personnel - Pastors and Deacons rostered with the ELCA or serving under letters of extended ecumenical service.

Family - Included among members of one's family may be any or all of the following: spouse, children, parents and in-laws, siblings, spouse's siblings, grandparents, or other family members for whom the Pastor or Deacon has primary responsibility.

Illness - Following the definition provided by West Penn Hospital for a "Serious Health Condition." It is an illness, injury, impairment, or physical or mental condition that involves:

Inpatient care in a hospital, hospice or residential medical care facility.

or continuing medical treatment by a health care provider.

Leave - Time off work agreed upon by pastors or deacons and congregations or affiliated agencies for specific situations involving self or family. At the end of the period of leave, the pastor or deacon will return to his or her same position.

Parents - include actual parents or one standing in the place of a parent (i.e. A guardian with whom a person resided as a child)

Siblings - One's own brothers and sisters, and those of one's spouse.

Policy Recommendations

Addition of a Family Member

Addition of children to a family includes birth or adoption. In each case the dynamics to family structure and patterns are modified in similar ways. Each addition means a need for a certain amount of time for adjustment to reach an acceptable level of comfort with the changes.

The ELCA Call Form requires six weeks paid **maternity/paternity or adoptive** leave. In complicated births or other medical concerns a longer period of leave may be appropriate. In these cases, request for additional leave should be made with a doctor's recommendation.

In all cases when a child is added to a family, The Southwestern Pennsylvania Synod recommends that twelve to sixteen weeks paid parental leave (salary and benefits) be granted. In special situations, request for additional leave may be made.

It is recommended that congregations and other affiliated agencies consider instituting a "Phase Back" policy. "Phase Back" refers to a parent returning to work after the addition of a family member with a modified schedule for a specific period of time. Such a pattern allows for both parent and child and congregation to become comfortable with the changes and demands that are placed upon the Church Professional.

Family Leave

Family Leave refers to extended leave for the pastor or deacon to care for a family member of the pastor or deacon. Such leave begins after all provided paid leave has been used. When family leave is needed to care for a seriously-ill family member, the pastor or deacon should state the care he or she will provide, and an estimate of the period during which this care will be provided.

Total family leave should not exceed twelve weeks during a calendar year (which aligns with the federal Family Medical Leave Act [FMLA], although that legislation does not apply to ELCA congregations). While salary is not paid during family leave, housing and health insurance will continue to be paid by the congregation or affiliated agency. Unpaid salary during this period of leave will be used as compensation provided to an interim pastor or church professional.

Bereavement

At the death of a family member, the pastor or deacon will be eligible for up to one week of paid leave. If additional leave is necessary for travel or personal need, such extension of leave will be discussed with Congregation Council, Board of affiliated agency, or appointed personnel officer. Such agent may grant additional leave.

Sick Leave

The ELCA Call Form requires that up to eight weeks of paid sick leave be granted. Provision is made for partial disability in accordance with ELCA Pension and Benefits guidelines.