

SUGGESTIONS FOR INDIVIDUALS AND CHURCHES TO CONSIDER FOR FAMILY LEAVE

This document might be helpful to individuals and churches who are navigating tough decisions about taking time away from a regular work schedule as a pastor because of a family situation.

Many Christian Reformed churches do not have an existing policy or procedure in place to support church staff who need to adjust their regular work schedule due to childbirth, adoption, and other family situations. At the same time, as a denomination, the Christian Reformed Church values family life and caregivers.

In the Christian Reformed tradition, we believe in the importance of family not just as a place of safety, love, and growth but also as a place of discipleship and faith formation. We love and support families as part of God's beautiful plan for transforming us as his covenant people. Caring for the families of those who lead our churches and work within our denomination, therefore, seems paramount.

Part of caring for families is making space for those who have recently given birth to a child, adopted a child, provided foster care, or who need to care for an immediate family member - and this includes allowing time away from our day-to-day work of ministry in order to pay our full attention to these momentous changes in our family life. As the Spirit of God works in, through, and around us in our lives and ministry, we as a denomination support times of change, transition, and growth in our families.

The purpose of this document is to offer suggestions, relevant resources, and real examples of how other churches have handled these difficult decisions and made provisions for church staff when it was necessary to take a family leave (paid and unpaid) from the regular work schedule. The term *family leave* is used in this document to distinguish it from other types of leaves. There are no official policies or procedures in the CRCNA specifically for the local church. In Canada, legislative provisions are made for [employee leave entitlements](#).

1. Here are a few stories of how a family leave has helped staff in local churches:

Story #1

A church gives a female pastor 6 weeks of paid leave and 3 additional weeks of unpaid leave to give birth and take care of her baby. In addition, the pastor saved vacation time and she was allowed to take an additional two weeks. Although a personnel committee gave a recommendation about how much time should be given for a family leave, the Administrative Council decided to go beyond that recommendation and be very generous.

Story #2

A church had no set precedent for paternity leave other than general vacation time for their pastor. A male pastor and his wife were expecting their first child. The church leadership looked at what other congregations in their area had given to their pastors in similar situations. They decided to give their pastor one extra week of paid vacation and two Sundays off from preaching around the due date. However, due to various complications, the family spent more time in the hospital than expected. The

Council gave the pastor an additional week of paid vacation/leave, and an additional Sunday off from preaching. The pastor was very grateful, and it helped him to ease back into work after a very draining time.

Story #3

A church has a full-time female pastor on staff. When this staff member was expecting her first child, council decided to give her the opportunity to take up to 12 weeks of maternity leave with six weeks paid at 60% of her salary. The pastor was regularly given three weeks of paid vacation. By saving this time to use during her maternity leave, the pastor was able to take 12 weeks off of work with 6 weeks at 60% of her salary, 3 weeks of paid vacation, and 3 weeks of unpaid leave.

Story #4

A congregation had a clergy couple on staff who split one full-time position. Each time the couple was expecting a baby, the mother reduced her part-time hours and the father increased his. This allowed the mother to take a full year of maternity leave after the birth of each of her four children, while her husband increased his work hours to full-time.

Story #5

A church became aware that their pastor's spouse needed surgery. The church gave its pastor one month of paid leave to care for his wife and children during this disruptive time.

2. Here are a few examples of policies that some congregations have to help them make decisions regarding family leaves:

Church #1

"Parental Benefits – Time and duration of a maternity leave should be determined not less than 3 months prior to the anticipated time of childbirth.

Ordinarily benefits include:

- a. Six weeks maternity leave prior to or following the birth of a child, adoption, or guardianship, with full salary and benefits.
- b. Additional six weeks leave for doctor certified pregnancy-related illness or disability, with full salary and benefits.
- c. One week paternity leave following the birth, adoption or assumed guardianship of a child, with full salary and benefits.

Flexibility is important in arriving at a mutually satisfactory arrangement. Each situation is unique."

Church #2

“Absences from Work - If a staff member is unable to report for work, he or she should notify their supervisor as far in advance as possible. Full-time staff members will be entitled to six (6) sick days per year and part-time employees working fifteen (15) hours or more on average will be entitled to three (3) sick days per year for which each staff member will receive full pay. Sick days may be accumulated to a limit of twenty (20) days. Sick time taken in excess of accumulated sick time will not be paid. No compensation will be paid for unused days, nor is it acceptable to use such days other than for illness. [The church] may at its discretion request a doctor’s statement verifying the illness and its duration. **Medical leave** is available only to full-time staff. These must be used as full days and may be up to eight(8) weeks in a rolling calendar year.

Leave of Absence and Short Term Disability Leave - A personal leave of absence without pay may be granted to a staff member. Such leaves of absence, for up to six months, will be considered on an individual case-by-case basis and requests for such leaves must be made in writing to the Administrative Council and approved by the Council. In the case of a pregnancy related leave, the duration of the leave will ordinarily be eight weeks, unless other arrangements are made or unless medical circumstances require.

If the leave of absence is due to illness, accident, or pregnancy, the leave of absence will be considered as continuous service. Any staff member who desires insurance coverage while on an approved leave of absence must make appropriate arrangements with his or her supervisor and pay for this insurance coverage in advance.”

3. Now that you’ve seen a few examples, we encourage you to have a conversation with your staff and council. As you do so, here are a few things to keep in mind:

- Work with the pastor or church staff to consider his/her request for an extended work leave. The key is to explore together what are your options.
- Check the policies and practices of nonprofit and for-profit organizations in your area (schools, parachurches, churches and companies). Find out if there are churches in your classis that have had a similar need. You might be surprised by what you learn.
- Create a policy together in community with other churches or classes.
- Check state and federal laws in the U.S. concerning family leaves. There is no national program in the U.S. for paid family leaves.
- Work together as a church leadership team to come to a decision that works best for your pastor, church staff and church.
- Establish a procedure for your church and keep good records for future use.

Please also keep in mind:

- It is better to have a written policy in place before it is needed.
- Be sure the policy is communicated to all staff in advance. Once it is in place, apply it consistently.
- Consider how your policy will apply to full time vs part time staff.
- Consider how your policy might differ as it relates to pastors vs church staff.
- Have a regular review and evaluation of the policy.
- Consider various types of leave that your congregation offers and how these might overlap or interact with each other (e.g. will a sabbatical of one staff overlap with someone's parental leave).
- Be clear about salary and benefit implications (will either be reduced during the leave? If so, by how much?)
- Written policies not followed are like not having policies.

4. Relevant Documents and Resources to Explore:

[U.S. Department of Labor Family & Medical Leave Act \(FMLA\)](#)

[Guide to the Family and Medical Leave Act \(FMLA\)](#)

[Evangelical Covenant Church Recommendations for Church Family and Medical Leave Procedure and Practice](#)

[Examples of Maternity and Paternity Leaves in Baptist Churches](#)

Perhaps you have some stories you would like to share about what was or would have been helpful in your situation. This is a great opportunity to share stories, resources, policies and practices that might be helpful as we learn together how to better care for our families.