



Family and Parental Leave Policies of the ELCA

Report prepared by Deacon Shannon Johnson, project coordinator for the Quality of Call Initiative for Women in Ministry, one of three foci.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has committed to seeking gender justice, understanding this both as an issue of faith and a way to love our neighbors. This commitment can be seen through two recent actions: approval of the social statement *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* in 2019 and formation of the Quality of Call Initiative. Both the social statement and the initiative invite the church to understand and respond to the church's policies, values, and realities of just and equitable practice. This report examines how the expressed values of the social statement and initiative are practiced in synod compensation guidelines and recommends support for the vocations of rostered ministers as parents and family members providing care.

Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action

Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action gives insight into the teachings, traditions, vision and challenges of the church and society regarding sexism and patriarchy. The social statement offers a response, or call to action, in 18 implementing resolutions. The social statement declares that sex or gender does not exclusively determine human traits or callings (Article 36) and cites the need for policies and practices that support parenting or family-care roles without reinforcing gender-based stereotypes (Article 37). The need for supportive family and parental policies is reiterated in Implementing Resolution #7. The various expressions of the church are urged to “address inequities” and “advocate for adequate and equitable leave for all parents and families.”ⁱ

The Quality of Call Initiative

The Quality of Call Initiative envisions “a church that is equitably served by people who are empowered to serve with their gifts, irrespective of identity markers heretofore targeted by systems and individuals for bias, discrimination, and oppression.”ⁱⁱ Making this vision a reality is multifaceted. Compensation for rostered ministers is one component of equity within ministerial service in the church. Supportive parental and family leave policies are crucial to support equitable compensation and to prevent potential situations of discrimination due to gender, gender-based stereotypes, and the family situations of rostered ministers. In other words, all rostered ministers will be positively affected by equitable family and parental leave policies.

Data Collection and Definition in Report

Originally intended to serve as an internal document for the churchwide organization, the ELCA Conference of Bishops and synods, this report compiles data on parental and family leave policies gathered from synod websites in October 2021. These policies vary from synod to synod in both the terminology used and the elements included in policy recommendations. In this report, parental leave is defined as leave for rostered ministers adding a family member. Likewise, family leave is defined as leave for rostered ministers to provide care for a family member during illness, injury or other needs. Synods establish guidelines for these types of leave, as well as recommendations or expectations for congregations when calling a rostered minister.

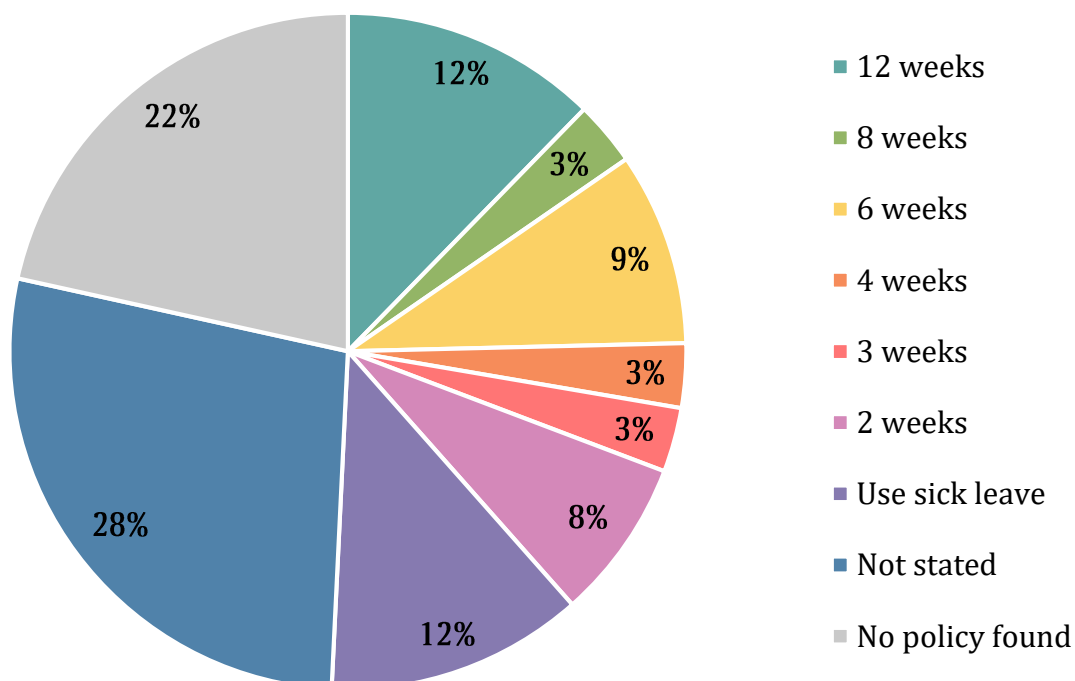
Family Leave Policies

Family leave is defined as leave for rostered ministers to provide care for a family member during illness, injury, or other needs.

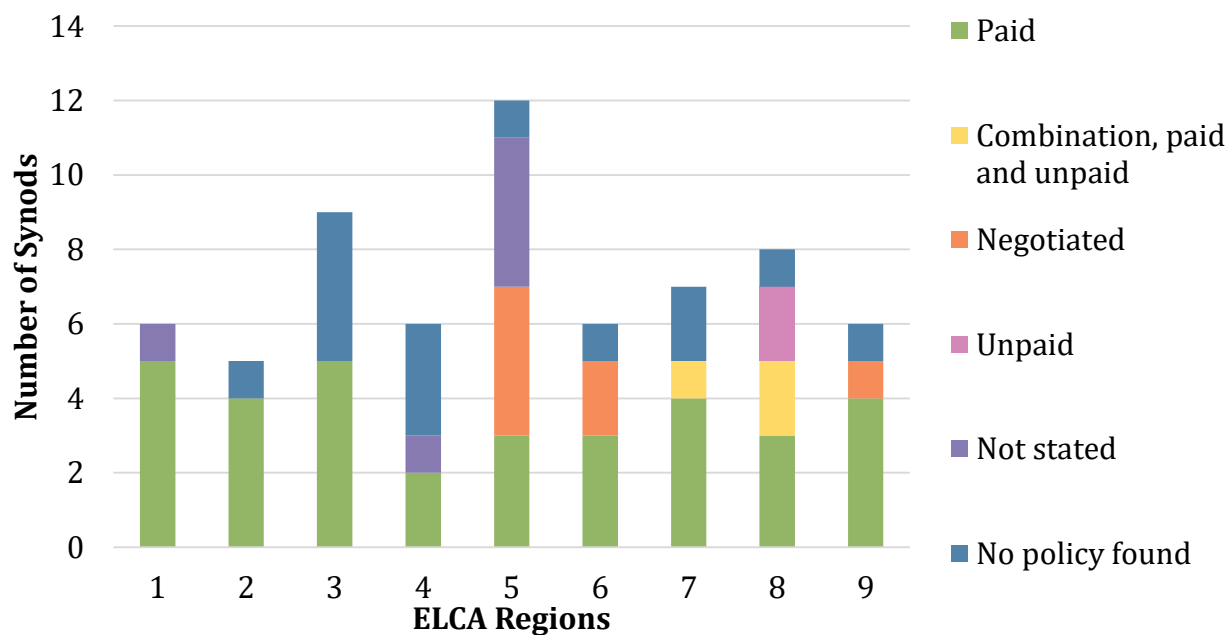
Elements of Family Leave Policies

- Fifty-one synods (78%) **have a policy related to family leave**. Fourteen synods (22%) do not have policies related to family leave or do not include them on their website or in synod compensation guidelines.
- Thirty-eight synods (74%) have a **dedicated section of synod compensation guidelines for family leave recommendations**. In other synods, family leave policies may be described along with parental or sick leave. Six synods describe family leave in two of their leave policy recommendations (e.g., family leave and sick leave).
- Five synod policies reference the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA).
- Four synod policies include that family leave may be used **only after all paid leave is used**. Two of these synod policies state that paid sick leave may be used for family illness.
- Of the family leave policies across the ELCA, the **family members identified for care** are:
 - Child — two synod policies (4%).
 - Child, spouse, or parent — 13 synod policies (25%).
 - Child, spouse, parent, or sibling — three synod policies (6%).
 - Extended family (including grandparents, grandchildren, and in-laws) — four synod policies (8%).
 - General language (family member or immediate family) — 20 synod policies (39%).
 - Relations not stated — nine synod policies (18%).
- **Reasons for using family leave:**
 - General or mild conditions only (care situations or illness) — 16 synod policies (31%).
 - Combination of mild and severe conditions — seven synod policies (14%).
 - Serious conditions only (extraordinary illness or family emergency) — 28 synod policies (55%).
- **Compensation on leave recommendations:**
 - Paid family leave — 32 synod policies (62%).
 - Combination of paid and unpaid leave — four synod policies (7%).
 - Negotiated pay — seven synod policies (13%).
 - Unpaid — two synod policies (4%).
 - No recommendation stated — six synod policies (11%).

Synod Family Leave by Recommended Durationⁱⁱⁱ



Regional Family Leave by Recommended Compensation



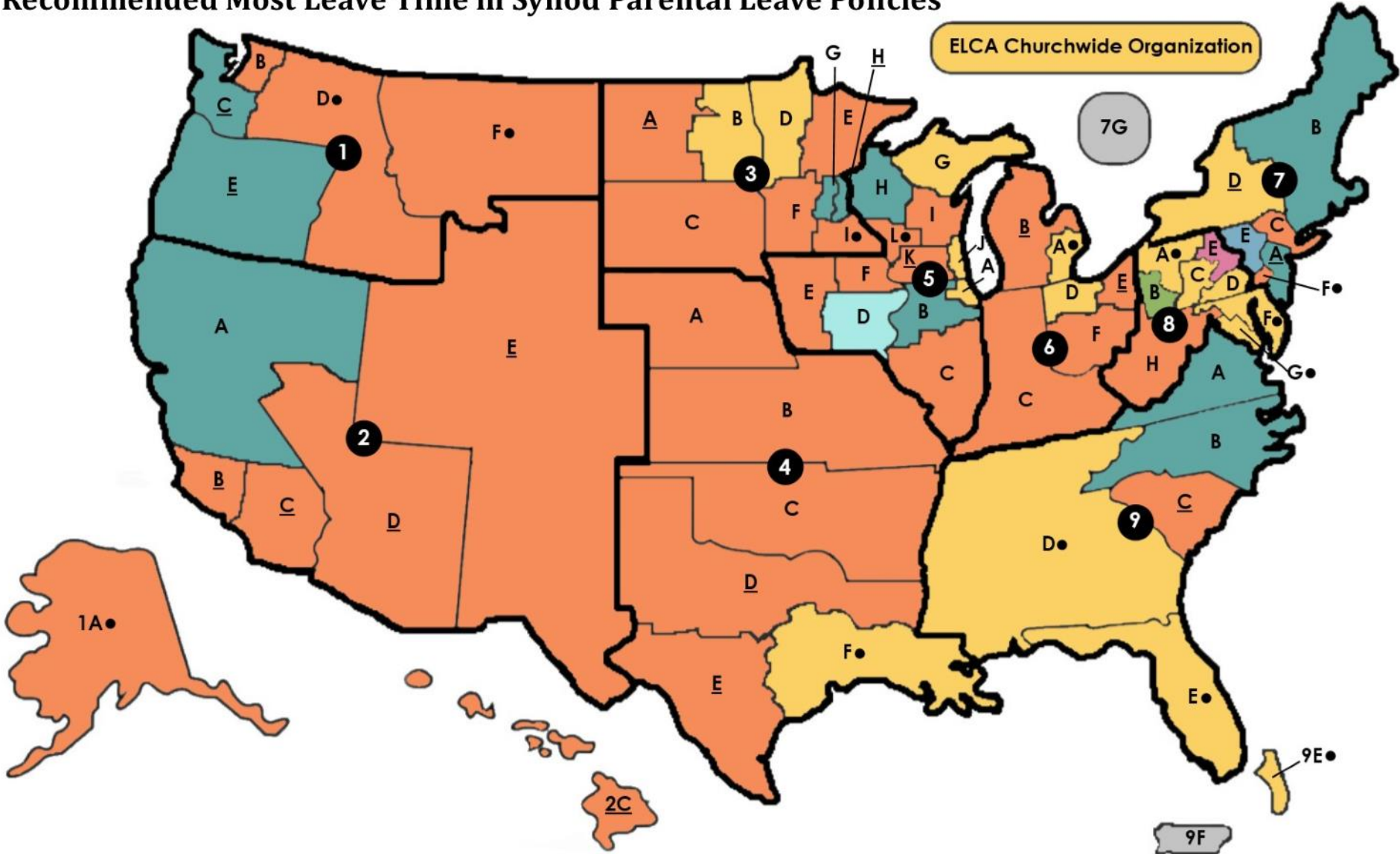
Parental Leave Policies

Parental leave is defined as leave for rostered ministers adding a family member.

Elements of Parental Leave Policies

- **Parent's gender:** 50 synods (77%) recommend parental leave policies which are the same for all parents, regardless of gender.
- **Parent terminology:** Parental roles are described using:
 - Gender-based terms (maternity/paternity, mother/father) – 27 synod policies (43%)
 - Parent – 25 synod policies (40%)
 - Professional title – five synod policies (8%)
 - Caregiving role (primary/secondary) – four synod policies (6%)
 - Both gender-based terms and caregiving roles – two synod policies (3%)
- **Childbirth and adoption:**
 - 55 synods' (85%) parental leave policies recommend the same leave for parents of all children, whether adopted or naturally born.
 - Nine synods (14%) include foster placements and guardianship in family leave policies.
 - Five synods (8%) recommend less time of leave for parents by adoption compared to parents by childbirth.
 - Three synods (5%) differentiate leave for parents of adopted children based on age, recommending little to no leave for parents adopting older children.
 - Two synods' (3%) parental leave policies do not include a recommendation for adoption.
- **Values identified in policy:** 18 synods (28%) describe a value related to parental leave, including supporting healthy relationships for rostered ministers, care as a high priority in the church, the time needed to adjust to new family dynamics, and the church's value of family.
- **Recommending more time:** 12 synods (18%) recommend 12 weeks or more of parental leave. These synods 75% have higher rates of women serving than the ELCA rate.
- **Recommending less time:** 32 synods (49%) recommend a parental leave duration of only six weeks. Eleven of these synod policies state six weeks as the maximum leave duration. Six of these policies state six weeks as a minimum duration of parental leave.
- **Letter of call:** Five synods' (8%) policies state that a congregation should include the specific benefits of parental or family leave in its Letter of Call or call paperwork.
- **Employment commitment before or after leave:** Three synods' (5%) policies require six months' employment before or after parental leave. One synod (2%) requires six months' employment in the congregation before and after parental leave.
- **Pregnancy loss:** One synod (2%) identifies miscarriage and stillbirth as parental experiences included in the policy of leave for parents.^{iv}

Recommended Most Leave Time in Synod Parental Leave Policies



● : minimum guideline (e.g., "at least 6 weeks")
⏟ : maximum guideline (e.g., "up to 6 weeks")



6 weeks



8 weeks



10 weeks



12 weeks



6-8 weeks



6-12 weeks



12-16 weeks

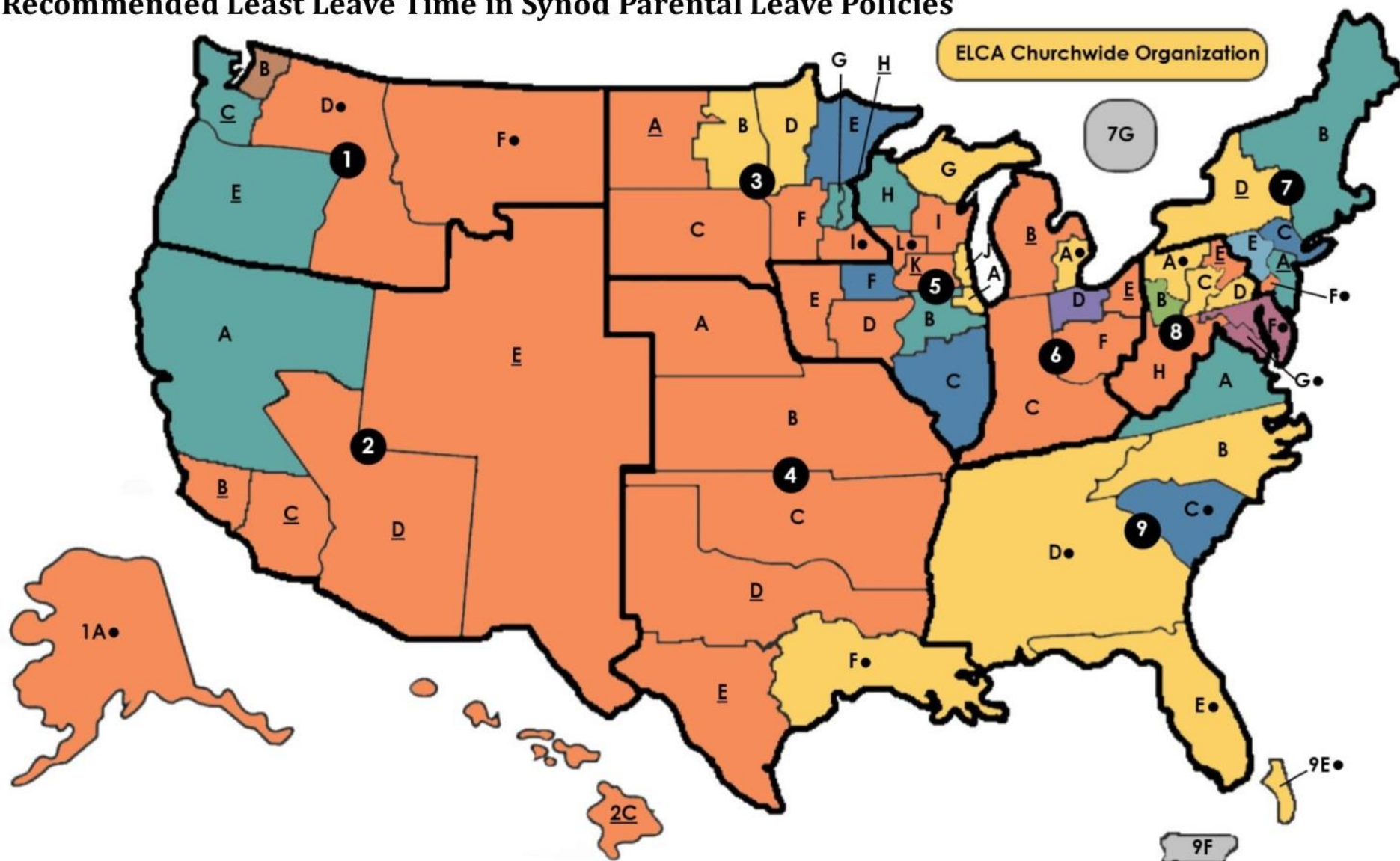


No Policy Found

The parent terminology used in synod policies for this role includes primary caregiver, maternity or paternity leave, parent, and rostered minister.

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Recommended Least Leave Time in Synod Parental Leave Policies



Z● : minimum guideline (e.g., "at least 6 weeks")

Z : maximum guideline (e.g., "up to 6 weeks")



2 weeks



4 weeks



6 weeks



8 weeks



12 weeks



4-6 weeks



6-12 weeks



12-16 weeks



Unclear



No Policy Found

The parent terminology used in synod policies for this role includes secondary caregiver, maternity or paternity leave, parent, and rostered minister.

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Synod Reference List

Region 1

1A Alaska
1B Northwest Washington
1C Southwestern
Washington
1D Northwest Intermountain
1E Oregon
1F Montana

Region 2

2A Sierra Pacific
2B Southwest California
2C Pacifica
2D Grand Canyon
2E Rocky Mountain

Region 3

3A Western North Dakota
3B Eastern North Dakota
3C South Dakota
3D Northwestern Minnesota
3E Northeastern Minnesota
3F Southwestern Minnesota
3G Minneapolis Area
3H Saint Paul Area
3I Southeastern Minnesota

Region 4

4A Nebraska
4B Central States
4C Arkansas-Oklahoma
4D Northern Texas-Northern
Louisiana
4E Southwestern Texas
4F Texas-Louisiana Gulf
Coast

Region 5

5A Metropolitan Chicago
5B Northern Illinois
5C Central/Southern Illinois
5D Southeastern Iowa
5E Western Iowa
5F Northeastern Iowa
5G Northern Great Lakes
5H Northwest Wisconsin
5I East-Central Wisconsin
5J Greater Milwaukee
5K South-Central Wisconsin
5L La Crosse Area

Region 6

6A Southeast Michigan
6B North/West Lower
Michigan
6C Indiana-Kentucky
6D Northwestern Ohio
6E Northeastern Ohio
6F Southern Ohio

Region 7

7A New Jersey
7B New England
7C Metropolitan New York
7D Upstate New York
7E Northeastern
Pennsylvania
7F Southeastern
Pennsylvania
7G Slovak Zion

Region 8

8A Northwestern
Pennsylvania
8B Southwestern
Pennsylvania
8C Allegheny
8D Lower Susquehanna
8E Upper Susquehanna
8F Delaware-Maryland
8G Metropolitan Washington,
D.C.
8H West Virginia-Western
Maryland

Region 9

9A Virginia
9B North Carolina
9C South Carolina
9D Southeastern
9E Florida-Bahamas
9F Caribbean

ⁱ *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019).
[https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Faith_Sexism_Justice_Social_Statement_A
dopted.pdf](https://download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Faith_Sexism_Justice_Social_Statement_Adopted.pdf)

ⁱⁱ "Quality of Call Initiative, Phase II: Program Design, Implementation and Evaluation," January 2021.

ⁱⁱⁱ Duration-of-leave categories combine policies that list the number of weeks as a maximum duration and those that list the number of weeks without a qualifier (e.g., "12 weeks" represents policies with the language "up to 12 weeks" and "12 weeks.")

^{iv} Martin Luther felt anguish for mothers who experienced miscarriage or whose babies were stillborn or died shortly after birth. In his day, people usually blamed mothers, which also meant mothers were indirectly guilty for their child not being baptized. Luther was horrified and sought to comfort women and disrupt the social and religious treatment of women. See *Luther's Works, Vol. 43: Devotional Writings II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 243-250. Luther points us to the theological necessity of caring for parents and people who give birth in particular. Restricting parental leave only to live births may reflect a similar social and theological position that blames the birth mother. It also does not serve the needs of many parents experiencing this loss who need time to recover physically and emotionally. Miscarriage, stillbirth, and infant death are parental experiences. Extended time off is often needed for the person giving birth to recover physically, and for each parent to begin to heal emotionally. Parental leave more appropriately than sick leave meets the needs of all parents for recovery.