

Maternity Leave for Women Ministers

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I have discovered that many churches do not have a policy, nor do they consider putting one in place until a woman arrives to serve on staff. The idea of maternity leave for a minister is often an afterthought. In fact, even thinking about having a pregnant minister on staff can create a sense of panic for a congregation if the idea is not thoughtfully presented before the need arises. What will happen while the minister is away from the church? How much time should the church provide for a minister to be out with her new family member(s)? How does the church anticipate or readjust for potential change once the minister returns from maternity leave?

Ministers often represent for their churches a model for family life, and churches should discuss openly the opportunity and even necessity of ministers who are new parents having time to stay at home and nurture their own family. Churches can keep good ministers, male and female, in our world by treating them as if their work, family, *and* life matter. Preparing for a minister to have maternity leave demonstrates mutual respect and care, and can encourage a minister to remain among a congregation for a significant and meaningful period of time.

Here are a few suggestions for your congregation to consider if you do not already have a policy in place:

- * Set aside at least six weeks for maternity leave. Encourage the minister to also take vacation or other leave time as part of their maternity time. (Another suggestion: if you only have male ministers, have you considered paternity leave?)
- * Enlist an interim (perhaps a student who is interested in ministry) to fill the position for the time that the minister is away. Hiring an interim is a great way for others to learn about ministry on a short-term basis. Your church may even want to secure funds for this interim position in a discretionary fund so as to avoid having to readjust the budget mid-year.
- * Look at other positions in the area or call other churches to explore what policies they have for maternity leave.
- * Be willing to negotiate when ministers returns to work. Can they work from home a few days a week? Is it possible to change office hours to be flexible? Defining clear expectations up front and keeping the paths of communication open will benefit your congregation and their ministry deeply.
- * Realize this policy may bring up many difficult comments that may reflect jealousy or criticism. Prepare your church members to respond with both empathy, but also stand firm for the sake of the church and for good ministry that is taking place. Formulating a maternity leave policy is a great learning opportunity for your church and a chance to grow as a family together. Remember that your minister is entering a new world—

perhaps becoming a parent for the first time. Having ministers who are new parents can be a great advantage for the church, for new mothers and fathers bring a new skill set to their ministry position.

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