

Clergy Time Off Guidelines and Considerations ¹

The Staff Pastor Parish Relations Committee is charged with multiple tasks related to clergy and staff – one of which is to ensure that compensation and benefits are fairly and consistently administered. Succinctly put – to make sure your pastor takes the time off available as part of their compensation and benefits package. Time off helps pastors with what we all need – a chance to rest, relax, recharge, and renew. Review the guidelines below.

Keep in mind that pastors are reluctant to take time off due to the challenges in finding others to fill in the gaps. Pastors spend significant time each week on:

- Worship planning and preparation
- Sermon planning and preparation
- Pastoral care and visitations
- Outreach and community connection
- Leading staff and ministry teams

Who will tend to these key responsibilities and other ministries while a pastor takes time off? Not having a plan or support to fill these roles increases the pastor's reluctance to take the needed time off.

The SPRC can assist the pastor (and eligible church staff) to take time off by:

- Being familiar with the guidelines for time off
- Encouraging the pastor to develop a schedule and a plan for time off
- Working with church leadership to assist in filling the gaps
- Advocating for the pastor when other leaders or the congregation resist the time off

Time Off Policies

Vacation

The vacation policy (last updated in June 2016) can be found [here](#) on the Annual Conference under Administration. The church is responsible for paying for the pulpit supply or someone to deliver the sermon during worship. The pastor, in consultation with the SPRC and church leadership, should provide for services in the church when the pastor is on vacation. The minimum guidelines are as follows: *Upon hire and/or appointment, full-time pastors are eligible for an annual vacation of at least four weeks with pay including at least four Sundays.* It is important for the SPRC to know these are minimum requirements. Additional vacation or time off may be granted by the local church. (Always document any additions to the time off policy.)

¹ Some information for this document comes from the Minnesota Annual Conference of the UMC, <https://www.minnesotaucm.org/files/websites/www/2021+Clergy+Time+Off+Guidelines+and+Considerations.pdf>.

The official policy of the Great Plains is as follows²:

“All people serving churches shall receive a minimum of four weeks of vacation (28 days, including 4 Sundays). All persons are strongly encouraged to take their full vacation each year. However, persons can only accumulate or bank a maximum of 1½ times the total amount of vacation time they are allowed to earn.

When persons reach their maximum vacation time, they do not accrue more vacation until the accumulated amount drops below the maximum amount that they can accumulate. Accrual calculations occur only on July 1 of each appointive year; therefore, if a person has reached his or her maximum accrual and has not taken any additional vacation by July 1, he or she would have to wait until the following year to receive additional vacation time.

Persons who regularly work less than full time receive the same amount of weeks of vacation but pay is prorated to the percent of time worked.

All earned vacation will be paid upon termination of employment, including but not limited to change of appointment, for all persons. A local church may require a pastor to use the last weeks of an appointment as vacation rather than paying the unused vacation as an extra check. It is the expectation that the SPRC chair and/or staff person who keeps personnel records will be notified when vacation is being used and will maintain a record of vacation used.

The word ‘earned’ refers to a situation where a person leaves their appointment in the middle of a conference year. The four weeks of vacation granted to that person on the prior July 1 would be reduced proportionately to the percent of the year actually served in that appointment.”

While not a Conference policy, SPRC’s could consider the following best practice:

Eligible vacation days for one year shall be counted to correspond with the fiscal year cycle established by the local church (typically January 1 to December 31 or July 1 to June 30). In cases of appointments that occur in the middle of the fiscal year, the number of vacation days should be pro-rated to reflect the fraction of the current annual cycle still remaining or negotiated through the district superintendent and the SPRC. The pastor shall be given the privilege of dividing his or her vacation into two or more periods of time. Vacations should be scheduled with discretion in relationship to camp and/or conference responsibilities. Any pastor who moves may feel free to take his/her vacation during the first summer on the new charge.

Professional Formation Leave

Your pastor is encouraged to pursue continuing education and/or a spiritual growth program for professional formation each year. The leave of one week per year, including a Sunday, should not be considered as part of vacation, and may be taken in single day increments.

² The Great Plains Policy Handbook is found here: <https://www.greatplainsumc.org/policyhandbook>. The Clergy Vacation Policy is listed as one of the policies identified.

New Parent Leave

[New legislation about Parental Leave was approved at Annual Conference in 2025 to go into effect January 1, 2026. Until then, the following is provided as guidance:]

Up to 13 weeks of maternity or paternity leave is available for a pastor who becomes a new parent following the guidelines of The Book of Discipline (§ 356). Eligibility for parental (maternity or paternity) leave include the following: “a 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.” Things to keep in mind when requesting parental leave include the following:

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 ninety (90) days prior to its beginning.
2. Compensation will be maintained for no less than the first eight (8) weeks of leave but could extend through the whole leave period.
3. 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. Appointed clergy *may* be able to request funds for pulpit supply to cover the period of leave in coordination with the district superintendent.

New policies take effect January 1, 2026 related to leave related to birth, adoption, foster care and kinship care placements. Key elements of the new policy are as follows:

- Parental leave should be requested at least 90 days in advance of the anticipated beginning of the leave, in accordance with the 2020/2024 Book of Discipline. Clergy should send notification in writing to the District Superintendent, Episcopal Office, and the Board of Ordained Ministry Registrar.
- Parental leave shall be encouraged and permitted for up to 13 weeks with full compensation and will not affect the clergy person’s pension, health benefits, and appointment status.
- Churches will maintain their regular compensation for clergy on leave for the duration of the leave.
- Coverage for Pastoral Responsibilities for the church or churches involved will be arranged before leave begins by the clergy through consultation with the DS and S/PPRC.
- The Annual Conference will assist local churches with additional funding for pastoral coverage, in consultation with the clergy person and the S/PPRC, up to \$4,000 per leave.

You can find the entire policy, plus the procedure and an application for the funding for pastoral coverage on [our website](#).

Camping/District/Conference Ministry Involvement

Each pastor is encouraged to devote time to work at a conference, district, and/or conference camp experience each year. The leave commitment of one week per year, including Sunday, should not be considered as part of vacation time.

Renewal Leaves

Continuing Education and Spiritual Growth Leave

The Book of Discipline (§351) directs full-time clergy who are members in full connection of the Great Plains Annual Conference (Deacons, Elders, or Associate Members) to take a short-term “formation” leave for Continuing Education and Spiritual Growth. This type of leave “shall include at least one week each year and may include at least one month during one year of every quadrennium.” The time away is in addition to vacation time. The local church continues providing compensation and benefits during the pastor’s leave.

Renewal Leave

The second opportunity is for a longer leave, or, what we refer to as “Renewal Leave” which is found in The Book of Discipline (Par 351.3). Clergy who held full-time appointments for at least six years may request “Renewal” Leave of up to six months in duration (usually no more than 12 weeks) while continuing to hold an appointment in the local church. The time away is in addition to vacation time. The local church continues providing compensation and benefits during the pastor’s leave. Financial help for pulpit supply and pastoral care coverage may be available in consultation with the district superintendent. A formal plan of ministry coverage, plus for learning and growth is part of the application for Leave. In order to request Renewal Leave, the following must be completed:

- Meet jointly with the District Superintendent and the Pastor-Staff Parish Relations Committee of the local church/charge being served at the time of the request to describe the plan for the Renewal Leave.
- Secure the approval of the Administrative Council(s)/Church Council(s) and the Pastor Staff Parish Relations Committee of the church/charge being served at the time of the request.
- Secure the written approval of their District Superintendent.

The Great Plains website lists additional information, including an application for a grant to assist with financial needs during the Renewal Leave for the pastor or congregation(s) here:

<https://www.greatplainsumc.org/renewal-leave>

Time Off Considerations

Weekly Rhythms

It is important for pastors to take at least one day off each week. Occasionally, a pastor may have a week without a day off, but this should be the exception, not the rule. When that *does* happen, clergy are encouraged to take an extra day off during another week. When clergy are providing additional leadership for ministry “outside the walls” of the church for things like leading mission trips, conference camps, or church retreats, it should be noted that these are not “days off” or vacation time. It is important for the SPRC to support and encourage their pastor to regularly practice a “Sabbath” day of rest from the work of the congregation.

[Sick Leave

NOTE: It is the intent to bring a more defined sick leave policy providing 14 days of sick leave annually to annual conference session in 2026. Until then, the following guidance is offered:

A pastor who is sick and home recovering is to be paid for the day off. The day at home is not to be considered vacation. If the pastor is unable to work for more than 2 consecutive weeks due to recovery from an injury, illness, surgery, or other medical treatments, then the SPRC and pastor consults with the district superintendent to move to a formal medical leave. The medical/incapacity leave, found in the Policy and Procedure Manual, is not to replace a sick leave policy.]

Part-time Clergy

Part-time clergy are eligible for all time off benefits described above but compensated according to their part-time employment status. (For instance, a halftime or .50 pastor would still be eligible for the full 4 weeks but paid their normal halftime salary.) Exception: part-time clergy are not eligible for the longer Formational and Spiritual Growth Leave.