

Proposal 2

Proposal: Support for Ministry Personnel Taking Maternity and/or Parental Leave
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Origin: Division of Ministry Resources Regional Council 15

What is the issue?

Ministry personnel taking maternity and/or parental leave are reporting negative and discriminatory experiences in the communities of faith they serve.

In Trisha Elliot's 2018 *Broadview* article "Pregnant in the Pulpit," numerous women in ministry in the United Church reported that, rather than being a joyful time, their pregnancy and leave became a time of stress and conflict as:

- Their leave was perceived as an unfair burden by the local community of faith.
- They were resented and harassed.
- The wisdom of having called them in the first place was questioned.
- They received insufficient or ill-informed support from other levels of the church.

Elliot's article had been inspired by discussion within a private Facebook group for United Church ministry personnel (BAM) in which additional women in ministry shared similar experiences from recent years.

A particularly contentious aspect of maternity/parental leave has been the mandatory top-up paid by the local community of faith, amounting to 40% of the minister's regular wages for up to 15 weeks of leave (*Pastoral Relations: Supporting the Pastoral Relationship*, 2020). These payments supplement the standard EI benefits for new parents of 55% of regular wages for up to 35 weeks for any parent, or 50 weeks for a parent who has given birth (maternity + parental benefits). This financial requirement contributes both directly and indirectly to increased stress on the pastoral relationship as:

- The minister becomes the source of an unexpected expense for the local community;
- The burden of the top-up leads to a reduced budget for coverage during the leave, often leaving the community of faith under-served and exacerbating resentment toward the minister.

This issue disproportionately impacts younger ministry personnel, and particularly young women in paid accountable ministry, who are more likely to be early in their ministry career and serving as solo ministers in communities of faith with fewer financial resources. Younger women in ministry are therefore at significant risk of experiencing discrimination in the workplace and discrimination in hiring by communities of faith that perceive them as a financial risk. At the same time, communities of faith struggling to sustain life and mission while under the increased financial pressure that attends maternity/parental leaves risk suffering damage to their life together, and of doing harm to the continued pastoral relationship.

Why is this issue important?

Key underlying theological, ecclesiological, missional, or justice issues?

As a church that is committed to justice and equality, we cannot ignore the workplace hostility and discrimination faced by ministry personnel taking maternity/parental leave, nor the financial pressures on communities of faith that exacerbate this injustice and do damage to everyone involved. Failing to provide better support for ministry personnel taking maternity/parental leave is a failure to live up to our own values as a denomination, a failure to uphold the human rights of our ministry personnel, and will limit the full participation and retention of women in paid accountable ministry.

We believe the Spirit is urgently calling us to respond to this issue by:

1. Taking measures to better educate communities of faith about gender-based discrimination.
2. Creating a document outlining best practices for supporting the health of the pastoral relationship before, during, and after a maternity/parental leave.
3. More equitably sharing the cost of the maternity/parental leave top-up payments.

Staff/Financial Implications

1. A survey and preparation of Best Practices to guide a just and productive navigation of maternity/parental leaves will presumably require significant work by regional and denominational staff.
2. The financial implication of covering maternity/parental leaves using regional or denominational funds of course depends on the annual number of people taking leave, which is likely low based on the current demographics of our ministry personnel.

How might the General Council respond to the issue?

1. Survey ministry personnel who have taken maternity/parental leave about their experiences and how the church can better support this form of leave at all levels.
2. Develop a document outlining best practices before, during, and after a maternity/parental leave to be used by ministry personnel, the local community of faith, ministry personnel covering the leave in an appointment or pastoral charge supervisor, and regional councils.
3. Direct that funds for the maternity/parental leave top-up payments come from the national or regional level in order to share the cost across the wider family of the church, including those who will benefit from the minister's experience and service in later years. This lifts the burden from the local communities of faith with limited financial resources who are most likely to be served by younger ministry personnel, and would also help prevent discrimination in hiring by those who perceive calling a young woman to be a financial risk.