

2025 Clergy Time Off and Leaves: Guidelines and Considerations

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(<https://www.dakotasumc.org/resources/for-churches/church-leaders>)*

The Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committee (S/PPRC) 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 including time off and leave options. Supporting and encouraging your pastor to take the available time off as part of their compensation and benefits package are important. Time off helps pastors with what we all need – a chance to rest, relax, recharge, and renew. In some cases, time off is pursue continuing education endeavors. Pastoral ministry is an unusually demanding profession.

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

Add the more recent demands that include both in-person and virtual aspects of almost each of the items listed, thus amplifying the time commitments of clergy responsibilities. 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.

The S/PPRC 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 Annual Conference Journal includes the “Vacation & Time Off Policy” provided clergy by the Dakotas Annual Conference. The church is responsible for paying for the pulpit supply or someone to deliver the sermon during worship. (Funding support is available.) Minimum guidelines are noted below. It is important for the S/PPRC to know these are minimum requirements and additional vacation or time off may be granted by the local church. (Always document any additions to the time off policy.)

- Fulltime appointed clergy are to take four (4) weeks, including four (4) Sundays, for a total of 28 days per appointment year. More than four weeks may be granted by the local church by considering years of service in ministry, family needs, or other variables. Additional time off need to be documented in writing between the pastor and SPRC.
- Three-quarter time appointed clergy shall receive three (3) weeks, including four Sundays for a total of 22 days.
- Half-time appointed clergy shall receive two (2) weeks, including four Sundays for a total of 16 days.
- Quarter-time appointed clergy shall receive one (1) week, including four Sundays for a total of 10 days.

Sick Leave

Clergy under appointment are eligible for up to 10 days paid sick leave annually. These days will not accrue from year-to-year. They will be pro-rated for less than full-time service. Unused sick leave will not be paid out as cash compensation. If a clergy exceeds 10 days sick leave, the S/PPRC and district superintendent shall be consulted on next steps. It is expected that sick leave is not used for personal time off, but rather because the clergy person is either ill or recovering from a medical procedure or caring for a sick family member.

New Parent Leave

Up to 13 weeks of parental leave is available for a pastor who becomes a new parent following the Book of Discipline. Full compensation, salary and benefits, are to be maintained for at least 8 weeks, but hopefully, for the duration of the leave. Pulpit supply and pastoral coverage funds are available through the Pastoral Coverage Grant.

New Parent Leave

Pastoral Coverage Grant

Professional Formation Leave (BOD 350.2)

The pastor (deacons, elders, and local pastors) 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.

The pastor consults with the SPRC and/or Leadership Team to agree upon timeframe and focus.

[Continuing education funds](#) are provided by the church or the Board of Ordained Ministry. The church is expected to provide the pulpit supply funds for one Sunday.

Short-term Renewal (Continuing Education and Spiritual Growth Leave BOD 350.2)

Clergy who are members in full connection of the Dakotas Annual Conference (Deacons, Elders, or Associate Members) and Local Pastors are eligible to take a Short-term Renewal Leave to seek rest and renewal, educational opportunities, and/or spiritual growth of four weeks every four years. The time away is *in addition to* vacation time. The pastor communicates intention to the S/PPRC and/or Leadership Team. The local church continues providing compensation and benefits during the pastor's leave. The pastor contacts the district superintendent to obtain support for the short-term renewal plan.

Financial help for pulpit supply and pastoral care coverage is available through the [Pastoral Coverage Grant](#). The pastor or church leader completes the application and related budget which is reviewed by the appropriate individuals to determine if sufficient funds are available to provide coverage during the pastor's absence.

Long-term Renewal (Formational and Spiritual Growth Leave BOD 350.3)

Clergy who are members in full connection of the Dakotas Annual Conference (Deacons, Elders, or Associate Members) and Local Pastors who have held full-time appointments for at least six years may

request a Long-term Renewal Leave (Formational and Spiritual Growth Leave) *up to* six months in duration 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. A Formational Plan of learning and growth is a required part of the Long-term Renewal application process. The pastor contacts the district superintendent and the S/PPRC and/or Leadership Team to obtain support and completes the appropriate application to begin the formal process. The application for the Long-term Renewal is submitted, reviewed, and approved by the Review Team *at least* six months in advance of the requested leave dates (before June 1 or December 1 each year).

Financial help for pulpit supply and pastoral care coverage is available through the Pastoral Coverage Grant. The pastor and church complete the application and budget for review by the Review Team who determines the funding amount for pastoral coverage.

[Long-Term Renewal Overview/Guidelines](#)

[Long-term Renewal Application](#)

[Long-term Renewal Formational Plan](#)

[Pastoral Coverage Grant](#)

Personal Wellness Leave

Clergy under appointment serving a local church in the Dakotas Annual Conference may request a Personal Wellness Leave up to eight weeks when needed due to an urgent situation or crisis in the life of the clergyperson when other time away options are not available or not appropriate. The Clergy Personal Wellness Leave request is approved by the district superintendent in coordination with the Staff/Pastor Parish Relations Committee. The local church continues providing compensation and benefits during the pastor's leave.

The pastor contacts the district superintendent and if able, the S/PPRC, to request a Personal Wellness Leave. The [Personal Wellness Leave form](#) is completed by the clergyperson if possible. If not, the district superintendent completes on the clergy's behalf. The district superintendent approves or denies the request based upon the circumstances of the situation. The district superintendent works with the S/PPRC and leadership to seek pastoral coverage in the pastor's absence.

Financial help for pulpit supply and pastoral coverage is available through the [Pastoral Coverage Grant](#). Funds for the Wellness Plan is available through clergy well-being emergency funds by contacting the Area Director of Clergy Well-being.

Other Time Off or Leave Options

Higher Ground

The Book of Discipline requires clergy to participate in the assessment process provided by each Annual Conference every eight years. This process that is a part of the Higher Ground Initiative includes a one week retreat along with an additional two weeks of time off. The retreat is combined with a process of customized individual or group coaching support to address specific developmental goals of each clergy person. Pastors are invited to participate every eight years while in ministry. The S/PPRC is charged with knowing when their pastor is approaching their next opportunity for invitation to participate. They should also work with their pastor to ensure they are able to take the time away needed to participate in the retreat along with the additional two Sundays that are included with the [Higher Ground](#) program. Higher Ground is another opportunity for pastors to obtain the much-needed rest and renewal combined with developmental strategies for managing a stressful and challenging leadership role.

Higher Ground invites clergy into a season to renew, refocus, and recharge every eight years in their vocation of ministry. Higher Ground is the response of our conference to the Book of Discipline requirement that each annual conference ensures that “every clergyperson engage in a six-month process of personal and professional assessment and development every eight years.” The Higher Ground Retreat Track journey may be as long as 24 months.

In this 24-month season, clergy take time to renew, refocus, and recharge that is above and beyond their “vacation” agreement and other time away options with their charge. The time allowed includes four Sundays as outlined below:

- The first and second Sundays are at the beginning and end of the Summer Retreat, usually five days in July or August.
- The third and fourth Sundays away may be arranged anywhere within the 24-month window.

It is expected that clergy will be away from their duties commensurate with what would be typical for a Sunday away. This may be a few days before or following the indicated Sunday. (A “week” away for the life of a pastor is difficult to define.) The renewal benefit includes time away from all the participant’s duties and includes a stipend for pulpit supply.

Sabbatical Leave (BOD 351)

Clergy or associate members in full connection who have been serving in a full-time appointment for six consecutive years, or in a less full-time appointment equivalent to six consecutive full-time years, may request a long-term Sabbatical leave up to one year for a time of study or travel as approved by the Board of Ordained Ministry. The appointment to a long-term Sabbatical is to be made by the bishop upon the vote of the annual conference after recommendation by the Board of Ordained Ministry. A written request with a plan for study and travel is required. The clergy is not compensated during the leave period. The clergy is appointed to a leave of sabbatical time and would be appointed to a new church/context at the end of the leave period. Refer to 351 in the Book of Discipline for more information.

Other renewal leaves for clergy are available through Lilly Endowment’s [Clergy Renewal Program](#) and the [Louisville Institute](#).

While careful planning and preparation is necessary to successfully apply for renewal leaves, these factors should not impede or stand in the way of a pastor’s opportunity to take time away as directed by the Book of Discipline. Unfortunately, this is often the case. The S/PPRC is the needed advocate to smooth the pathway forward.

Other Time Off Considerations

Conference Commitment

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.

Weekly Rhythms

It is important for pastors to take regular days off with an expectation to take holidays and *at least* one day off each week. Clergy unable to take a day off need to take an extra day off during another week. Ministry time demands are relentless. Leading mission trips, conference camps, and church retreats are not “days off” or vacation time. It is important for the S/PPRC to be watchful of a pastor’s work patterns

to ensure the ability to take regular time off. Asking any exempt staff to track time off is an important practice to encourage as well.

Part-time Clergy

Parttime clergy are eligible for all time off benefits described above but compensated according to their parttime employment status. (For instance, a halftime or .50 pastor would still be eligible for the full 4 weeks but paid at half time as they normally would be paid.)

Camp and Retreat Centers

The Dakotas Board of Pensions funds a camping retreat opportunity for clergy and their family at one of the Dakotas camps for up to 2 weeks. Encourage your pastor to take advantage of this time away option at no cost to them by contacting the camping and retreat site director. Learn more [here](#).

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