

Getting to yes on paid family leave

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[Amy Zietlow](#) interviews Devon Anderson in the [July 27, 2022](#) issue



Devon Anderson (Photo by Celisia Stanton)

Devon Anderson is rector of Trinity Episcopal Church in Excelsior, Minnesota. As chairperson of the Task Force to Develop Churchwide Family Leave Policies for consideration at the Episcopal Church’s general convention this month, she has channeled her lifelong passion for gender and racial justice into the process of creating an attainable proposal for paid family leave.

How did this task force for paid family leave come about?

At the 2018 general convention, a resolution passed asking that the appointed task force, in consultation with the Church Pension Group, create a comprehensive mandatory paid family leave policy for Episcopal Church employees.

How did you become the chair?

Prior to being ordained, I served as a United States Senate staffer and worked on the original family medical leave bill. I worked for Senator Carl Levin from Michigan, who was involved in figuring out how to navigate the small business exemption. I learned early on that legislation only passes with strategic compromise.

What process did the task force follow?

We began with a ton of research in order to get everybody to the same starting line. One of the things we found in our research was that the Episcopal Church has been talking about this for decades. We were the sixth or seventh committee appointed to look at paid family leave, but previous initiatives had never seen the light of day: “It’s too expensive,” and “administrating a paid leave policy is impossible without a federal mandate or centralized payroll.” We also learned that the Church Pension Group couldn’t just go out into the insurance world and buy a family leave policy. It doesn’t exist. We had to create one.

We decided that we would be the last committee in the Episcopal Church to deal with this issue—and that, with the current sense of urgency about racial justice, we had an opportunity to contribute to a systemic undoing of things in our system that disproportionately affect Episcopalians of color in a negative way. Paid leave is a racial justice issue, in addition to being a gender issue.

What does paid leave look like in the proposal?

We worked with the Church Pension Group to develop a policy with three tiers: bronze, silver, and gold across 16 different variants. Each level varies in the amount of time away, length of employment required before taking leave, whether you can take the leave in increments, percentage of covered weekly earnings, and so on. Each diocese chooses which level of coverage they offer.

Why are you not recommending a mandatory family leave policy?

Without a federal mandate, making the policy mandatory was not possible. As a task force, we grieve that it will not be mandatory, but we had to accept that in all the great pieces of legislation, whether it be in Congress or in our church, change always comes in increments, and this is a powerful first step.

What kept you going in this process?

I'm invested in the next generation. The face of leadership is changing in our church, and when I look at the things that really equip the next generation of leaders, it's stuff like paid family leave. If we're invested in a diversity of opinion, experience, culture, voice, and theology, then the institution has to provide the conditions for that diversity. Paid family leave is about equipping and creating the conditions for people who don't have the access to privilege. Paid leave will impact young families and help small and rural congregations call young pastors who will most likely need leave.

How has your personal experience informed your work on paid family leave?

I have needed family leave several times in my ministry. At my first parish, I gave birth to my daughter. I was the associate rector. My boss had been in the parish for 30 years and was subsequently removed for sexual misconduct. When that happened, I was the person left standing, and I was pregnant. I got three months of leave, and it was paid, but they did not hire anybody to replace me. This caused a lot of stress on the system. The church was not intentional about absorbing the cost of paid leave structurally.

At my second parish, I had my son. I had a female rector, so I thought things might be different, but I was wrong. It was clear she thought that paid leave was a favor. I owed her, and I had to pay her back in extra duties when I returned.

Then my daughter was diagnosed with dwarfism. When we got the diagnosis, it took us a long time to set up her medical team. Early on we faced all kinds of potentially fatal challenges. She had ear issues. She cried for 18 months. She had to have surgeries. We were devastated. I needed leave.

I asked for time off and was not given it. It was probably the hardest six months of my entire life. We had just moved to a new city. We didn't have any support. We didn't know anybody. I stayed in the congregation for a while, and I did really good work, but relationally, I never got over the church's incapacity to have compassion for me and my family.

That's why paid family leave is so important to me. With the resources and talents we have as a church and what we profess about ourselves, I don't think anybody should ever have to deal with not having leave to care for their family member. It's inconsistent with our deepest beliefs and values as the church.

How does paid family leave reflect the theology of the Episcopal Church?

Everything about family leave is consistent with our baptismal covenant. Paid family leave helps us live into these promises at the heart of the Book of Common Prayer and at the heart of our life together as the church: to love one another and to work for justice in a way that reflects God's embodied presence in Christ. As faith communities, we live out the promises of our baptismal covenant with others—with our families—and paid leave helps us be present to the full joy and sorrow in our life together.

What advice would you give to other denominations looking to create a paid family leave policy?

We're often reticent in the church to talk about strategy, but passing legislation requires bringing all voices to the table, especially the oppositional ones, and creating a plan that speaks to all concerns. The partnership with the Church Pension Group held them accountable to being ministry partners. We started off in some conflict with them, because this proposal will cost money. At that point, it would have been human to think of them as opponents—but we all pray the same baptismal covenant. We decided to ask, "How can we get to paid family leave together?"—which means we had to have a willingness to compromise. Legislation is a process, and you never get everything you want in one step.

[*Read why "Pastors, like everyone else, need paid family leave."*](#)