

Inside the grassroots campaign to standardize 12 weeks of paid family leave for PC(USA) pastors

by [Fred Tangeman](#)

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(Clockwise from top left) Hailey Malcolm, Bethany Benz-Whittington, and Contina Lundy—three leaders of the grassroots movement to secure 12 weeks of paid family leave for PC (USA) pastors. (Courtesy photo)

This spring, Presbyterian Church (USA) ratified an amendment to its governing document, mandating a minimum of 12 weeks of paid family leave for called and installed pastors at congregations. The historic vote was the culmination of a six-year general assembly process, and also of grassroots church advocacy.

In 2014, the general assembly approved an overture “encouraging” six weeks of paid family leave across the denomination. That left it up to councils to decide what amount to provide, if any.

Voices against requiring a standardized minimum claimed that the [Family Medical Leave Act](#) already supported young families and that an outsized financial burden would be placed on small churches. Some national agencies argued church assets shouldn't support paid family leave because of fiduciary responsibilities to preexisting church programs, investors and pensioners.

While serving a church call in Colorado, Bethany Benz-Whittington was a member of [Young Clergy Women International](#), a group already discussing the terms of pastor contracts. Many young women pastors felt pressure to trade family leave guarantees for a higher salary. In Benz-Whittington's case, she didn't feel like she could ask for more money from the church because she had asked for 12 weeks paid leave.

A month into Benz-Whittington's call a different pastor posted on Facebook that she was receiving two weeks of family leave, creating a viral backlash that inspired Benz-Whittington and others to draft an overture for the general assembly in 2018 requiring 12 weeks.

"Advocacy is a big part of my faith journey," Benz Whittington said, before describing herself as a "polity geek." She wrote an overture to the general assembly when she was 19. And although it didn't pass, the experience showed her how changes in PC(USA) policy and governance could connect to sustained campaigns by grassroots organizers.

Phone calls and emails to presbytery contacts resulted in nine concurrences, with Boston Presbytery sponsoring the overture. In the end, three family leave overtures were placed on the docket of the 2018 general assembly.

Benz-Whittington felt frustrated by committee discussions that ended with a reduced recommendation of eight weeks going to the full assembly. A Family Leave Policy Task Force was ultimately tasked with making its own recommendation to the general assembly in 2020.

The task force's eventual recommendation included an amendment establishing 12 weeks as the minimum paid family leave to be included in all terms of call. But the Health, Safety, and Benefits Committee amended the task force report, recommending that a family leave policy be included in all terms of call, but deleting any language establishing a minimum amount.

Benz-Whittington and the grassroots supporters sprang into action, providing resources and guidance to those who sought to reinsert the language of 12 weeks during plenary.

It did not take long for plenary discussion to turn towards the topic of a mandatory length.

“The third person in line got called to make the amendment,” Benz-Whittington said. To her surprise, the changed language passed easily. “No one spoke against it.”

The assembly then proceeded to a vote and the main motion—with the 12-week minimum reinserted—passed [346 to 33](#). “I was in my guest bedroom watching this all on computer,” Benz-Whittington said. After a start-stop five years, “the whole thing went so fast.”

“We all celebrated on Zoom,” Benz-Whittington said. “Then we immediately began talking about organizing presbyteries.” Eighty-four would need to approve the amendment for it to be entered into the Book of Order, the governing document of the denomination.

“I was all over Facebook finding out attitudes of presbyteries. We found people to work with them and in November I started a spreadsheet tracking the vote count,” she said.

During the months of voting, Benz-Whittington saw PC(USA) millennials on social media frequently discussing the amendment and wanting to find out more. Ruling Elder Jodi Craiglow turned Benz-Whittington’s spreadsheet into a [website](#) where anyone could see the tally of votes needed for passage.

“I was tracking it every day,” Benz-Whittington said. “I was looking at the website on a Monday night when it was at 82, 83 votes. Tuesday is typically the day for presbytery meetings. Western North Carolina was the vote that did it. Rev. Megan McMillan from Mills River Presbyterian Church posted that we had the needed 84.”

The amended language will now be included in the Book of Order and go into effect July 9. In an interview, Kate Trigger Duffert, the manager for general assembly business and per capita in the Office of the General Assembly, said there are resources available for presbyteries and congregations looking to implement the new family leave policy.

“I’ve heard from many leaders about the ways they are already meeting this need,” she said. “Some have removed the financial burden of providing pulpit supply through a rotating list of volunteer elder preachers. Other presbyteries have established a shared fund to which congregations and individuals can make donations that helps make sure all pastors can receive this benefit, regardless of the congregation’s budget.”

While congregations and mid councils can use each other as resources, Trigger Duffert emphasized that, “there are people in the national offices who are available and eager to support the church through the changes that emerge from the assembly.”

Benz-Whittington left parish ministry years ago, during a period of family leave. She now runs her own business, [Sacred Calls](#), training church leaders and providing progressive Christian education. She will see no personal benefit from the change to the Book of Order. And yet she feels tremendous joy at what it means for other young families in the church.

A pastor friend on a contract at Decatur Presbyterian Church in Georgia recently had a baby. She texted Benz-Whittington to say that the session had retroactively applied the amendment to her employment, changing what would have been six weeks of paid family leave to 12.

As for the grassroots team, their efforts to help church families are far from complete. For instance, they are now looking at including family leave for all church staff, not just installed pastors. The task force recommendation itself draws attention to this disparity: “While this specific recommendation provides for called and installed pastors, the task force would urge adoption of this same provision of care for all PC(USA) workers.”

“Our theology doesn’t allow for hierarchy, yet we have created it at every level,” Benz-Whittington said. “We’re not just working on family leave here,” she added. “These are all steps toward building the kin-dom of heaven.”

For now, Benz-Whittington believes helping congregations figure out how to implement the 12-week minimum paid family leave standard for pastors should be a denominational priority. She specifically mentioned that Ruling Elder JoAnne Sharp and others on the [Advocacy Committee for Women and Gender Justice](#) are

producing materials that will help churches with this work.

“How do we make this cost-neutral for churches?” Benz-Whittington asked. “Do we help them through with pastoral leadership when someone is on leave?”

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