

Family and Parental Leave Policies of the ELCA

Report prepared by Deacon Shannon Johnson, project coordinator for the Quality of Call Initiative for Women in Ministry, one of three foci.

The Evangelical Lutheran Church in America has committed to seeking gender justice, understanding this as both an issue of faith and a way to love neighbors. This commitment can be seen through three recent actions: the formation of the Quality of Call Initiative, the approval of the social statement *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* and the Churchwide Assembly approval of the memorial “Parental and Family Medical Leave.” The initiative, social statement and memorial invite the ELCA to connect values and beliefs to the realities of caregiving needs within families and to respond with leave policies that promote just, equitable and supportive practices. This report examines how synod compensation guidelines recommend parental and family leave policies and practices that support the vocations of rostered ministers as parents and family members providing care.

The Quality of Call Initiative

The Quality of Call Initiative envisions “a church that is equitably served by people who are empowered to serve with their gifts, irrespective of identity markers heretofore targeted by systems and individuals for bias, discrimination, and oppression.”ⁱⁱ Making this vision a reality is multifaceted.

Compensation for rostered ministers is one component of equity within ministerial service in the church. Supportive parental and family leave policies are crucial to support equitable compensation and to prevent potential situations of discrimination due to gender, gender-based stereotypes and the family situations of rostered ministers. In other words, everyone can flourish through equitable family and parental leave policies.

Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action (2019)

Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action gives insight into the teachings, traditions, vision and challenges of the church and society regarding sexism and patriarchy. The social statement offers a response, or call to action, in 18 implementing resolutions. The social statement declares that sex and gender do not determine all human traits or callings (Article 36) and cites the need for policies and practices that support parenting or family-care roles without reinforcing gender-based stereotypes (Article 37). Implementing Resolution #7 reinforces the need for supportive family and parental policies. All expressions of the church are urged to “address inequities” and “advocate for adequate and equitable leave for all parents and families.”ⁱⁱⁱ

The 2022 ELCA Churchwide Assembly Memorial

In 2019 the Southwestern Washington Synod Assembly adopted the memorial “Parental and Family Medical Leave,” and in 2022 the ELCA Churchwide Assembly approved it. This memorial was voted en bloc with other memorials, and the assembly approved the memorial, with 94% in favor. This assembly action called for this church:

To encourage the synods of this church to include the following in their compensation guidelines for rostered ministers: “Parental and Family Leave: *Parental Leave*: Paid leave of up to twelve weeks is recommended upon the birth or adoption of a child to recover and/or care for a new child. *Family*

Medical Leave: Paid leave of up to twelve weeks is recommended to care for a family member with a serious health condition”;

To encourage the congregations of this church to study the issues, explore their capacity and the needs of staff, and adopt these guidelines not only for rostered ministers but also, where possible, for other staff, not only as compensation guidelines but also as a justice issue; and

To recommend that synods make available to congregations resources such as lists of supply pastors and model short-term supply contracts and compensation rates that may encourage congregations to offer the parental and family medical leave described in this action.ⁱⁱⁱ

Seventeen synods (26%) meet or exceed the memorial’s recommendation of up to 12 weeks of paid parental leave, and 12 synods (18%) meet the memorial’s recommendation of up to 12 weeks of paid family medical leave.

Data Collection and Definition in Report

Originally intended to serve as an internal document for synods, the churchwide organization and the ELCA Conference of Bishops, this report was first developed in 2021. Since then, it has been shared across the church, and over one-third of synods have updated their parental leave policies. This updated report compiles parental and family leave policy data gathered from synod websites in February 2024. These policies vary from synod to synod in both the language used and the elements included in policy recommendations. This report defines parental leave as leave for rostered ministers at the addition of a child to their family and family leave as leave for rostered ministers to provide care for a family member during illness, injury or other needs. Synods establish guidelines for these types of leave and recommendations or expectations for congregations when calling a rostered minister.

Family Leave Policies

Family leave is leave for rostered ministers to provide care for a family member during illness, injury or other needs.

Elements of Family Leave Policies

Family leave is:

- Addressed by synods in compensation guidelines or a separate policy on the synod’s website – 54 synods (83%).
- Not addressed in information on the synod’s website or in compensation guidelines – 11 synods (17%).

Synod policy addresses family leave for critical health conditions by:

- Setting an expectation of leave granted to rostered ministers – 31 synods (48%).
- Providing guidance for congregations to develop policies – 14 synods (22%).
- Both an expectation of leave and guidance for congregational policies – nine synods (14%).
- Nothing found – 11 synods (17%).

Synod policy addresses family leave for mild health conditions by:

- Setting an expectation of leave granted to rostered ministers – 16 synods (25%).
- Providing guidance for congregations to develop policies – nine synods (14%).
- Both an expectation of leave and guidance for congregational policies – five synods (8%).
- Nothing found – 35 synods (54%).

The following data and statistics refer only to the 54 synods that address family leave.

Family members identified for care:

- Child – one synod policy (2%).
- Child, spouse,^{iv} or parent – 10 synod policies (19%).
- Child, spouse, parent or sibling – three synod policies (6%).
- Child,^v spouse, parent, sibling, grandparents, grandchildren and in-laws – eight synod policies (11%).
- General language (family member or immediate family) – 31 synod policies (57%).
- Relations not stated – four synod policies (7%).

Care situations for family leave:

- Critical health conditions only (extraordinary illness or family emergency) – 24 synod policies (44%).
- Both mild and critical conditions – 15 synod policies (28%).
- General terminology (care situations or illness) – 15 synod policies (28%).

Compensation for family leave (*see synod map on page 9*):

- Paid family leave – 28 synod policies (52%).
- Negotiated pay – 10 synod policies (19%).
- Combination of paid and unpaid leave – three synod policies (6%).
- Accrued sick leave – six synod policies (11%).
- Unpaid – one synod policy (2%).
- No recommendation stated or statement unclear – six synod policies (11%).

Letter of call: In accordance with the ELCA model constitution for congregations,^{vi} seven synod policies (13%) state that a congregation should include the specific benefits of family leave in a letter of call or in call paperwork.

State and federal leave:

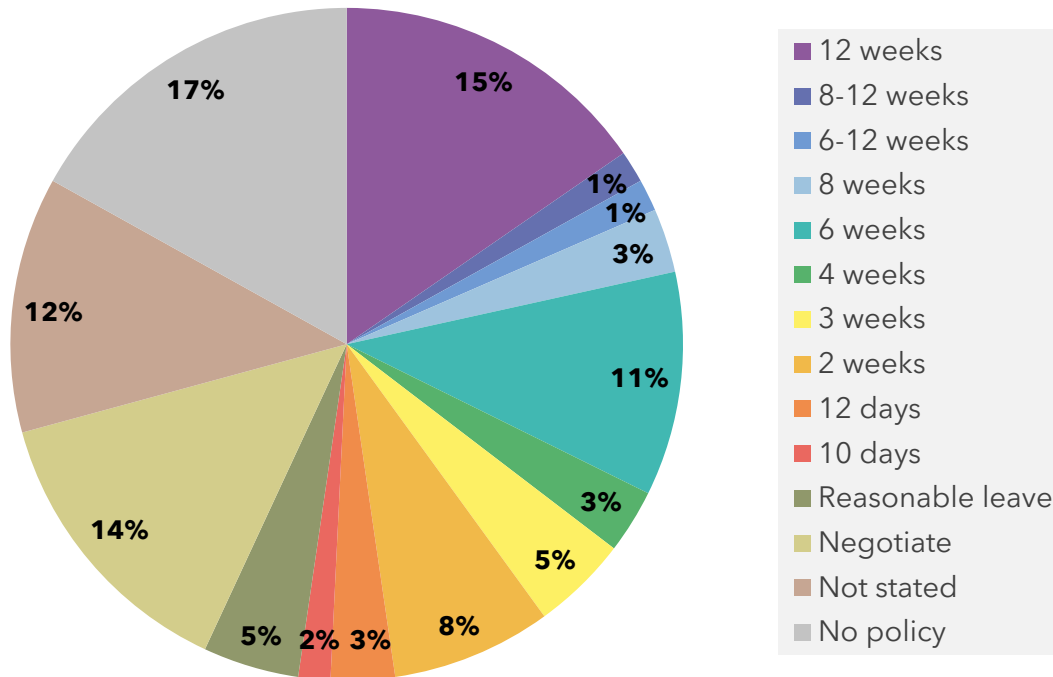
- Refer to the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 (FMLA) – eight synod policies (15%).
- Refer to state family and medical leave legislation that may affect congregational leave policies – nine synod policies (17%).
- Encourage enrollment in state programs for paid family leave – one synod policy (2%).

Effect on other compensation and benefits:

- Family leave should not jeopardize vacation time – six synod policies (11%).
- Family leave should not jeopardize continuing education time – four synod policies (7%).
- Family leave is unpaid, but benefits should continue – four synod policies (7%).
- Family leave may be used only after all paid leave is used – two synod policies (4%).

Duration of Family Leave in Synod Policies

See synod map on page 10.



Parental Leave Policies

Parental leave is leave for rostered ministers at the addition of a child to their family.

Language for parent roles and leave differentiation

Most synods do not differentiate leave duration based on a parent's gender, caregiving role or role in childbirth.

In this report, for synods that do recommend different leave durations based on a parent's gender, caregiving role or role in childbirth:

- The phrase "role with most leave" describes the parenting role with the most recommended leave time; synod policies identify this role as "maternity," "primary caregiver" or "childbearing parent."
- The phrase "role with least leave" describes the parenting role with the least recommended leave time; synod policies identify this role as "paternity," "secondary caregiver" or "nonbirthing parent."

Changes in parental leave policies since 2021

The Quality of Call Initiative for Women in Ministry first reviewed and reported on the ELCA synod parental leave policies in early 2021. Since the first report, 23 synods have updated their parental leave policies. These policy updates have amounted collectively to:

- 64-78 total additional weeks of leave throughout 18 synods in the role with most leave and
- 86-102 total additional weeks of leave throughout 23 synods in the role with least leave.

Elements of Parental Leave Policies

Parent's gender: Fifty-two synods (80%) recommend parental leave policies that are the same for all parents, regardless of gender, caregiving role or role in childbirth.

Language for parent roles in policies (*some synods use more than one of the roles listed, so percentages will not add up to 100%*):

- Professional title – 45 synod policies (69%).
- Gender-based terms (maternity/paternity, mother/father) – 22 synod policies (34%).
- Parent – 14 synod policies (22%).
- Caregiving role (primary/secondary) – six synod policies (9%).

Childbirth and adoption:

- Recommend the same leave time for parents of all children, whether joining the family through childbirth or adoption – 56 synod policies (86%).
- Include foster placements and guardianship in family leave policies – nine synod policies (14%).
- Recommend less leave time for parents by adoption compared to parents by childbirth – four synod policies (6%).
- Differentiate leave for parents of adopted children based on age, recommending little to no leave for parents adopting older children – two synod policies (3%).

Pregnancy loss: Two synod policies (3%) identify miscarriage and stillbirth as parental experiences included in the policy of leave for parents.^{vii}

Values identified in policy: Nineteen synod policies (29%) describe values related to parental leave, including supporting healthy relationships, care as a high priority in the church, the time needed to adjust to new family dynamics, and the church's value of family. Despite those values, nine of the policies with value statements recommend minimal duration (six to eight weeks) of leave time.

Cite research or ELCA social teaching: Three synod policies (5%) include information on the health benefits of parental leave for the child and parent^{viii} or ELCA social teaching supporting parental leave.

Letter of call: In accordance with the ELCA model constitution for congregations,^{ix} nine synod policies (14%) state that a congregation should include the specific benefits of parental leave in its letter of call or in call paperwork.

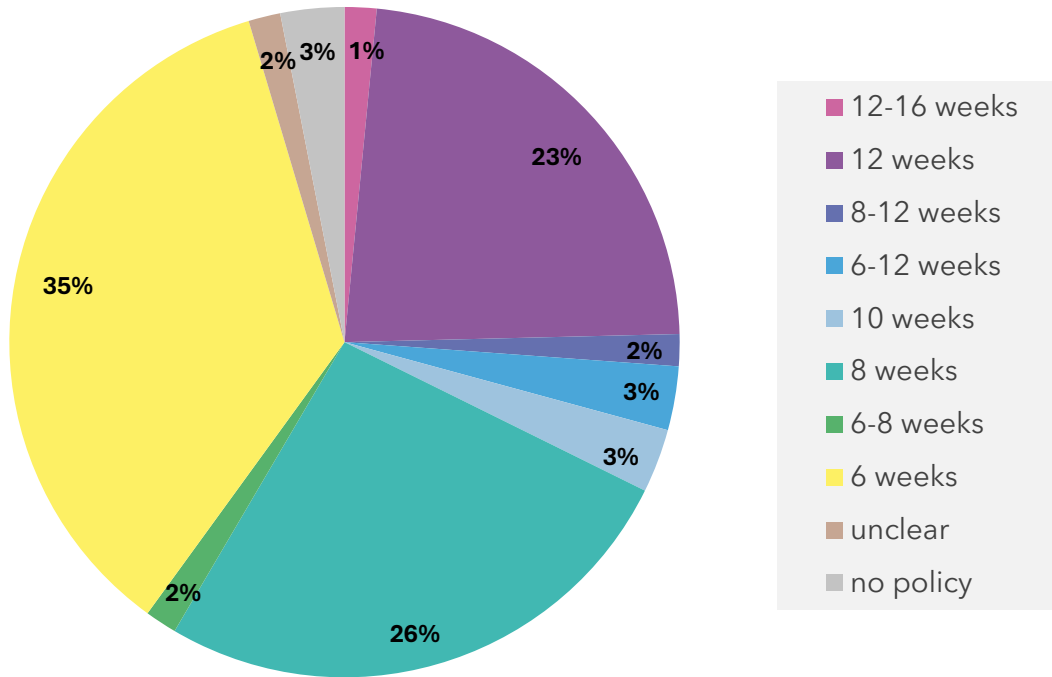
Employment commitment before or after leave: Three synod policies (5%) require six months' employment after parental leave. One synod policy (2%) requires six months' employment in the congregation before and after parental leave.

Expectations while on leave: Four synod policies (6%) emphasize that a rostered minister should not be expected to continue work responsibilities while on leave.

Block and intermittent leave: Eight synod policies (12%) include that parental leave may be taken as block, intermittent or a combination. Block leave is a continuous period away from work. Intermittent leave is taken intermittently through reduced work time (e.g., a rostered minister uses one week of parental leave by working half-days for two weeks). Intermittent leave allows a rostered minister to transition back into work and have the flexibility to adjust to their new family dynamics. Parental leave taken as block or intermittent leave is determined by the rostered minister in conversation with congregational leadership.

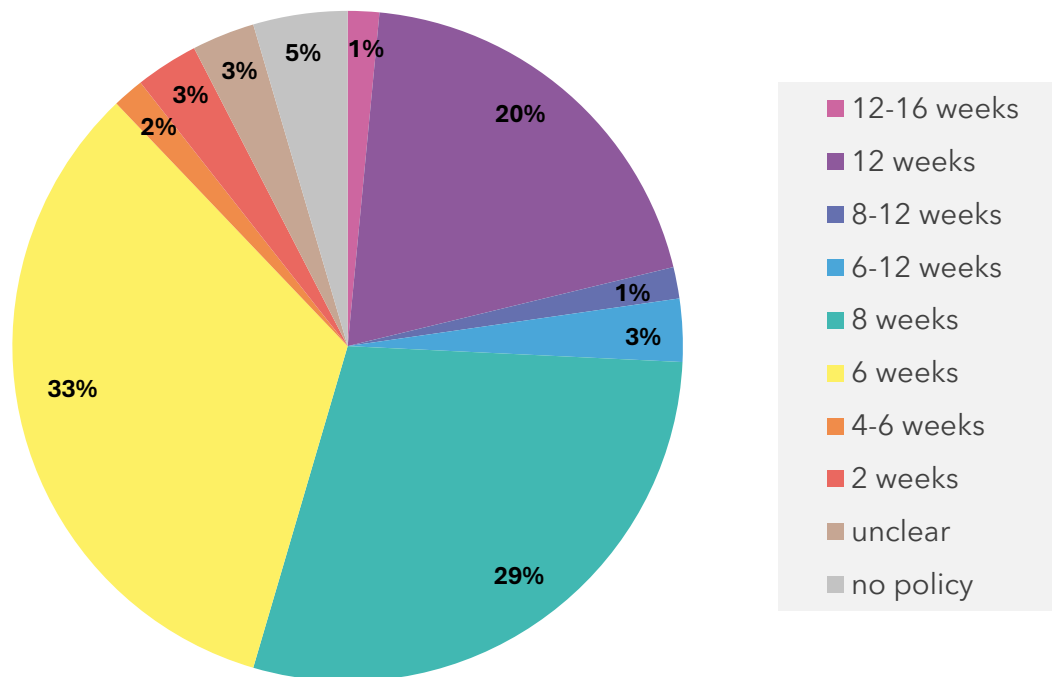
Duration of Parental Leave for Role with Most Leave^x in Synod Policies

See synod map on page 11.



Duration of Parental Leave for Role with Least Leave^{xi} in Synod Policies

See synod map on page 12.



Synod Reference List for Maps

Region 1

1A Alaska
1B Northwest Washington
1C Southwestern Washington
1D Northwest Intermountain
1E Oregon
1F Montana

Region 2

2A Sierra Pacific
2B Southwest California
2C Pacifica
2D Grand Canyon
2E Rocky Mountain

Region 3

3A Western North Dakota
3B Eastern North Dakota
3C South Dakota
3D Northwestern Minnesota
3E Northeastern Minnesota
3F Southwestern Minnesota
3G Minneapolis Area
3H Saint Paul Area
3I Southeastern Minnesota

Region 4

4A Nebraska
4B Central States
4C Arkansas-Oklahoma
4D Northern Texas-Northern Louisiana
4E Southwestern Texas
4F Texas-Louisiana Gulf Coast

Region 5

5A Metropolitan Chicago
5B Northern Illinois
5C Central/Southern Illinois
5D Southeastern Iowa
5E Western Iowa
5F Northeastern Iowa
5G Northern Great Lakes
5H Northwest Wisconsin
5I East-Central Wisconsin
5J Greater Milwaukee
5K South-Central Wisconsin
5L La Crosse Area

Region 6

6A Southeast Michigan
6B North/West Lower Michigan
6C Indiana-Kentucky
6D Northwestern Ohio
6E Northeastern Ohio
6F Southern Ohio

Region 7

7A New Jersey
7B New England
7C Metropolitan New York
7D Upstate New York
7E Northeastern Pennsylvania
7F Southeastern Pennsylvania
7G Slovak Zion

Region 8

8A Northwestern Pennsylvania
8B Southwestern Pennsylvania
8C Allegheny
8D Lower Susquehanna
8E Upper Susquehanna
8F Delaware-Maryland
8G Metropolitan Washington, D.C.
8H West Virginia-Western Maryland

Region 9

9A Virginia
9B North Carolina
9C South Carolina
9D Southeastern
9E Florida-Bahamas
9F Caribbean

Notes

ⁱ *Quality of Call Initiative, Phase II: Program Design, Implementation and Evaluation* (2021).

ⁱⁱ *Faith, Sexism, and Justice: A Call to Action* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2019). download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/Faith_Sexism_Justice_Social_Statement_Adopted.pdf

ⁱⁱⁱ *Evangelical Lutheran Church in America 2022 Churchwide Assembly Reports and Records: Assembly Minutes* (Chicago: Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, 2022), 55, 67-69. download.elca.org/ELCA%20Resource%20Repository/CWA2022.pdf?_ga=2.223448795.1521561016.1712163062-1925623541.1686345988

^{iv} Domestic partners are identified as qualifying care recipients in family leave policies of three synods and the ELCA churchwide organization.

^v Minors for whom the rostered minister is a legal guardian are identified as qualifying care recipients in family leave policies of five synods and the ELCA churchwide organization.

^{vi}*C9.04. and *C9.24. of the ELCA model constitution for congregations states: "The specific duties of the [pastor or deacon], compensation, and other matters pertaining to the service of the pastor shall be included in a letter of call, which shall be attested by the bishop of the synod." Family leave is one of the other matters that should be included in the letter of call and is outlined in the agreements form for compensation and benefits.

^{vii} Martin Luther felt anguish for mothers who experienced miscarriage or whose babies were stillborn or died shortly after birth. In his day, people usually blamed mothers, which also meant that mothers were indirectly guilty for their child not being baptized. Luther was horrified and sought to comfort women and disrupt the social and religious treatment of women. See *Luther's Works, Vol. 43: Devotional Writings II* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1962), 243-250. Luther points us to the theological necessity of caring for parents and people who give birth in particular. Restricting parental leave only to live births may reflect a similar social and theological position that blames the birth mother. It also does not serve the needs of many parents experiencing this loss, who need time to recover physically and emotionally. Miscarriage, stillbirth and infant death are parental experiences. Extended time off is often needed for the person giving birth to recover physically and for each parent to begin to heal emotionally. Parental leave, more appropriately than sick leave, meets the needs of all parents for recovery.

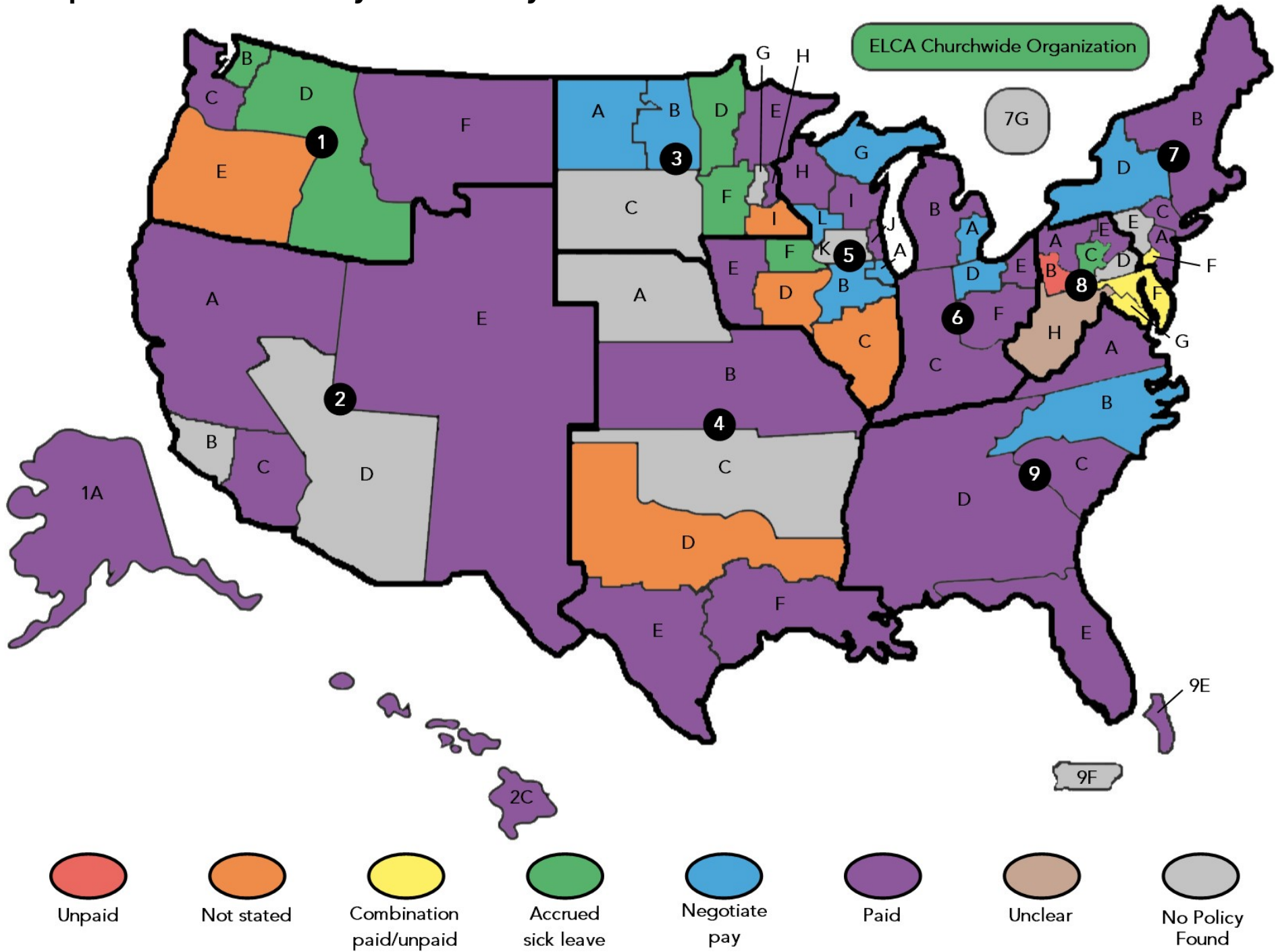
^{viii} This is the website included for child and parent health: [Paid Family Leave: How Much Time Is Enough?: Maternal Health and Wellbeing \(newamerica.org\)](https://www.newamerica.org/parenting/child-and-parent-health/paid-family-leave-how-much-time-is-enough-maternal-health-and-wellbeing)

^{ix}*C9.04. and *C9.24. of the ELCA model constitution for congregations states: "The specific duties of the [pastor or deacon], compensation, and other matters pertaining to the service of the pastor shall be included in a letter of call, which shall be attested by the bishop of the synod." Parental leave is one of the other matters that should be included in the letter of call and is outlined on line D.6. of the agreements form for compensation and benefits.

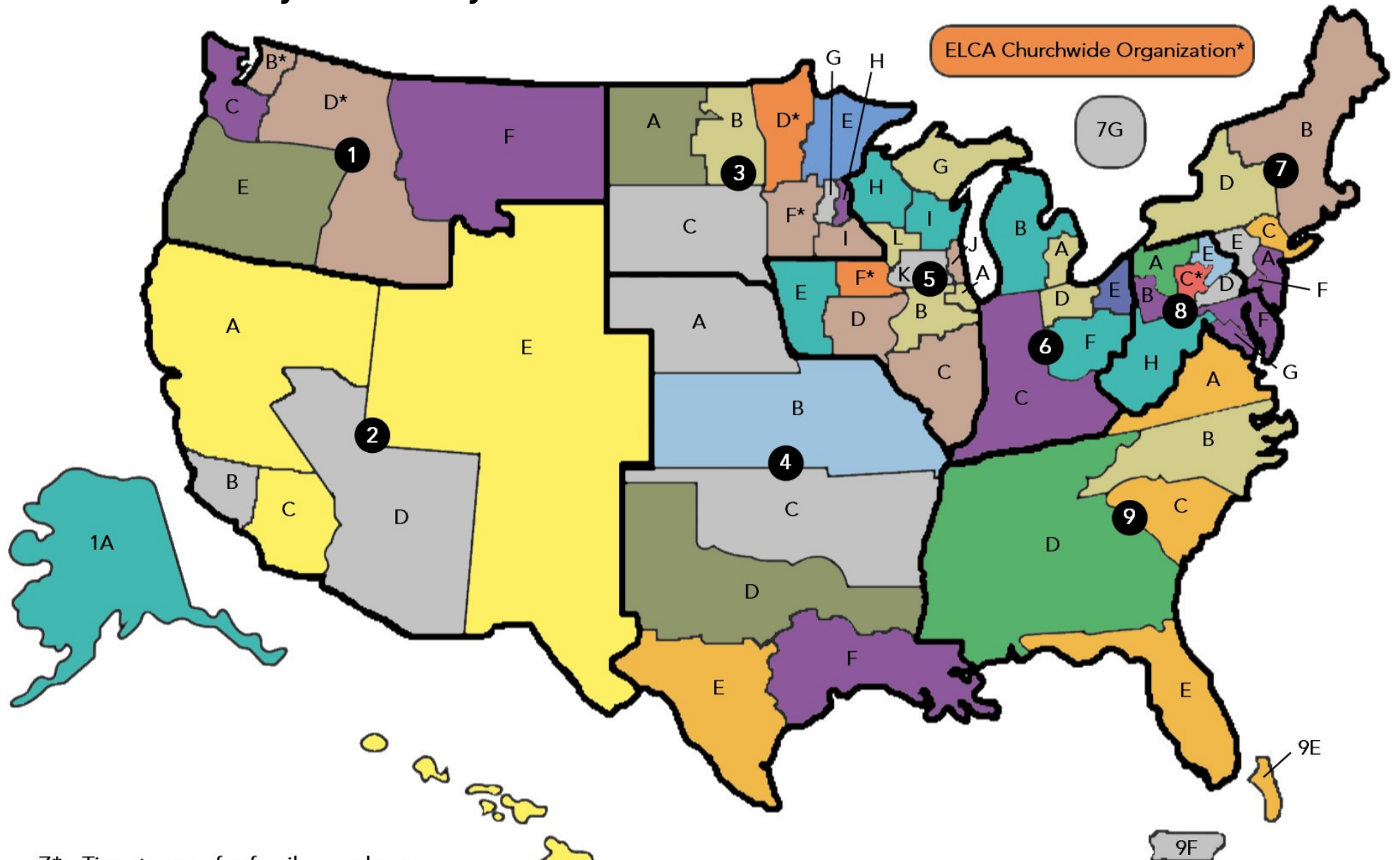
^x The phrase "role with most leave" describes the parenting role with the most recommended leave time; synod policies identify this role as "maternity," "primary caregiver" or "childbearing parent."

^{xi} The phrase "role with least leave" describes the parenting role with the least recommended leave time; synod policies identify this role as "paternity," "secondary caregiver" or "nonbirthing parent."

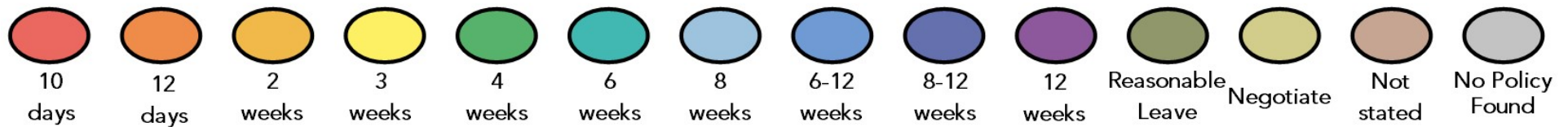
Compensation for Family Leave in Synod Policies in the ELCA



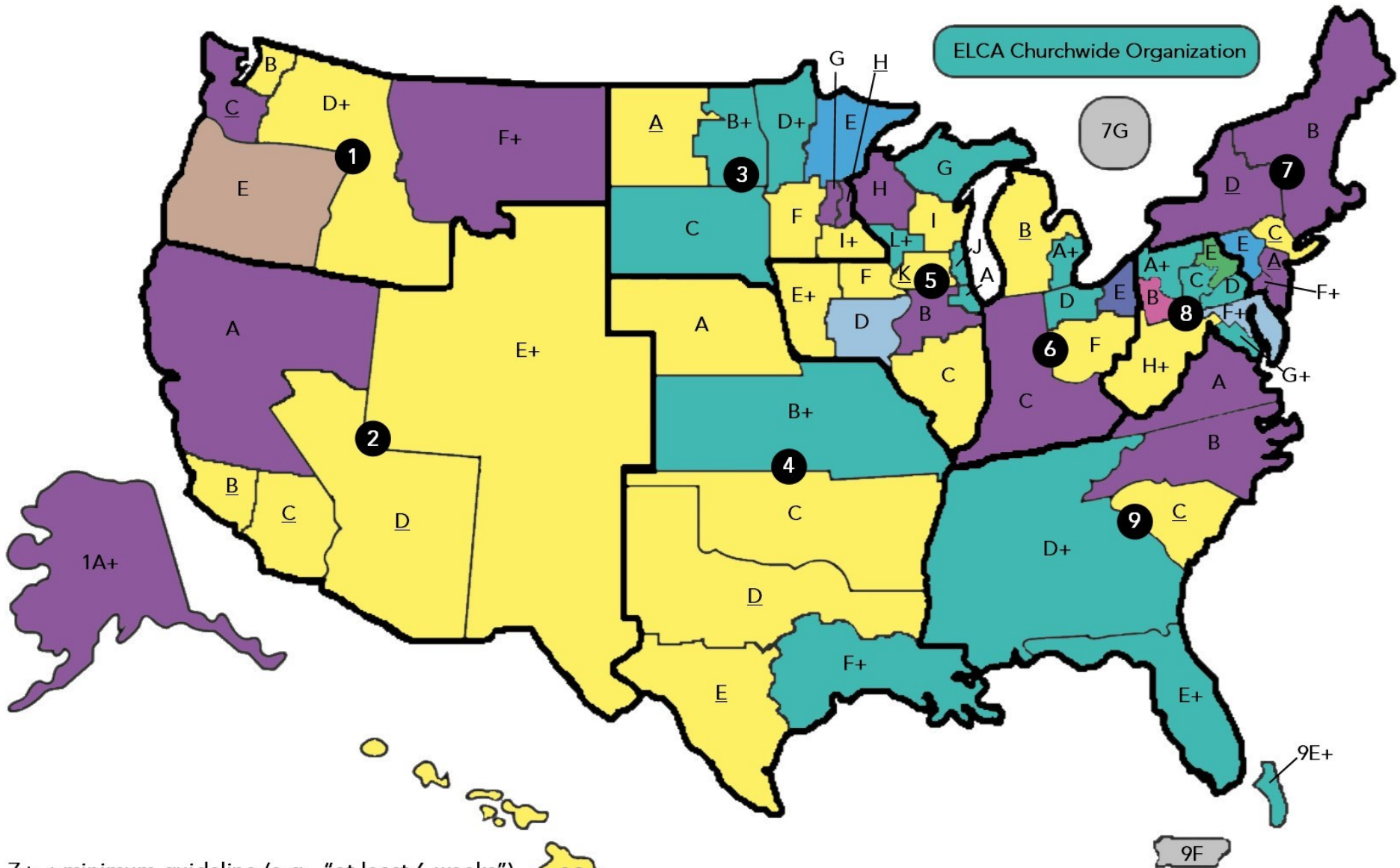
Duration of Family Leave in Synod Policies in the ELCA



Z* : Time to care for family members comes from accrued sick leave



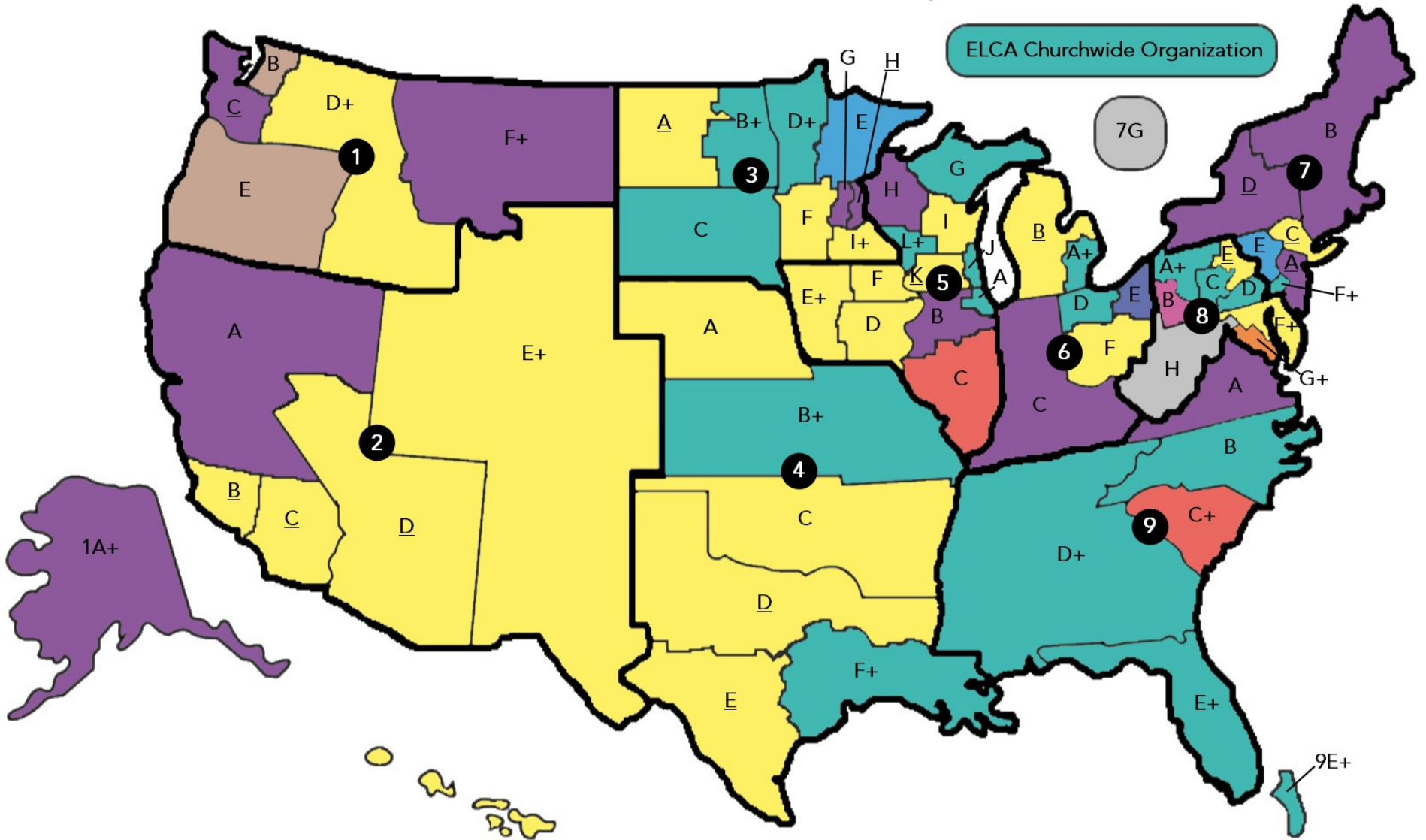
Duration of Parental Leave for Role With Most Leave in Synod Policies in the ELCA



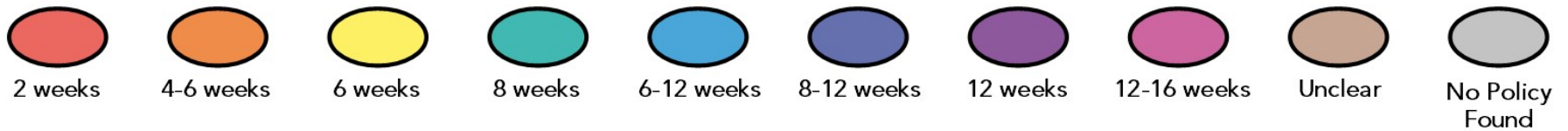
Z+ : minimum guideline (e.g., "at least 6 weeks")
 Z : maximum guideline (e.g., "up to 6 weeks")

The phrase "role with most leave" describes the parenting role with the most recommended leave time; synod policies identify this role as "maternity," "primary caregiver" or "childbearing parent."

Duration of Parental Leave for Role With Least Leave in Synod Policies in the ELCA



Z+ : minimum guideline (e.g., "at least 6 weeks")
Z : maximum guideline (e.g., "up to 6 weeks")



The phrase "role with least leave" describes the parenting role with the least recommended leave time; synod policies identify this role as "paternity," "secondary caregiver" or "nonbirthing parent."