



Caring for Babies, Caring for Families

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In Advent's season of expectant waiting, this year I'm naturally thinking about babies. Jesus' incarnation as a baby born to Mary. Happy, squalling babies who squirm in their parents' arms. Tiny, born-too-soon babies who can't endure too much touch each day. Babies born to a mama who's sick or a dad who's overeager or a non-binary parent who's thrilled. Babies placed in the care of other family members or the foster system. Babies whose parents must return to work before their bodies have healed from the labors of childbirth or their hearts have recovered from the wild family shift that always attends the presence of a new human.

Even Mary had some time of rest with Joseph's family following Jesus' birth—she didn't hop up on the donkey to go back home right after Joseph had his (newly-expanded) family recorded in the census. But most families in the United States don't even have that.

While the Family and Medical Leave Act of 1993 provides job protections to many people for up to twelve weeks of qualified leave every year, it does not require that employers pay their employees during that leave. According to the National Conference of State Legislatures, only [eleven states](#) require paid family and medical leave. This makes it [unaffordable](#) for many working people to take meaningful time off work in order to bond with a new child, heal from the physical rigors of labor, or care for a spouse who had been in labor.

Certainly, some employers pay for such leave even if it is not legally required. The United Church of Christ recommends twelve weeks of paid parental leave in its sample call agreement for clergy, though not all local churches follow this guideline; some churches expand this to include other forms of medical leave. But far too often, employers look at the law as the maximum for what

they should do for their employees rather than the minimum. Horror stories abound of parents who drag themselves to work after a medically difficult birth, or who go back to work while their partner is still recovering from major abdominal surgery following a caesarian birth (commonly called a c-section). Even though [studies](#) show that a robust paid leave program benefits [families](#) and [employers](#), only about twenty percent of workers have access to such a benefit.

This Advent, while we're all awaiting the birth of Jesus, I hope we'll give some thought to all the other babies being born this time of year (and at all the other times of the year, too), and to their families. What would it mean if among our wishes for these babies was a commitment to employment policies that supported their families so that they could begin their lives with more hope, peace, joy, and love to surround them?

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