



Voluntary Leave of Absence Guidelines and Application

“They who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings like eagles, they shall run and not be weary; they shall walk and not faint.”

Isaiah 40:28,31



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Most likely you are reading this because you have come to that point in your ministry where you feel the need to enter into a Voluntary Leave of Absence (VLOA) from your ministry.

This document will outline the process and provide you with items to consider as you seek to make this decision. It will also provide you with an application that you must complete and submit to the proper annual conference entities.

Your task is to take seriously this change in service into which you seek to move. This is not a matter to rush into and there will be consequences to your decision in relation to benefits. Please carefully consider all the items presented in this document prior to submitting your application for Voluntary Leave of Absence. If you wish to apply, you can do so at <https://wnc-reg.brtapp.com/LeaveofAbsenceApplication>.

¶ 353. *Voluntary Leave of Absence*

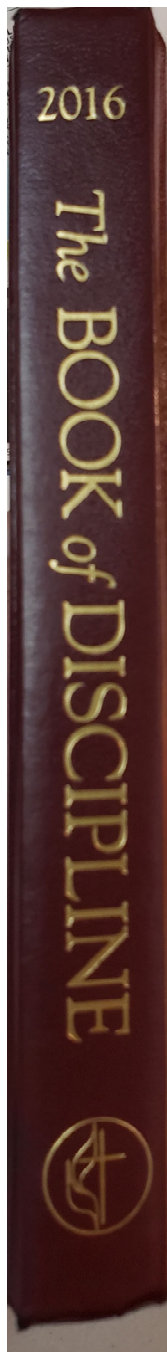
1. Provisional, associate, or members in full connection of the annual conference who for sufficient reason choose to temporarily take leave from their ministerial appointment may request in writing with a copy to the bishop and their district superintendent a voluntary leave through the Board of Ordained Ministry. This leave is granted or renewed by vote of the clergy members in full connection upon recommendation by the Board of Ordained Ministry.
2. A voluntary leave of absence may be taken for a variety of reasons:
 - a) *Personal Leave*—A relationship that is granted to clergy who self-determine for personal reasons that they are temporarily unable or unwilling to continue in a ministry appointment.
 - b) *Family Leave*—A relationship that is granted to clergy who, because of an immediate family member's need for full-time care, are temporarily unable to continue in a ministry appointment.
 - c) *Transitional Leave*—A leave granted for up to twelve months with approval of the bishop and the Board of Ordained Ministry to provisional and associate members and full clergy members in good standing who are temporarily between appointments.

A transitional leave of absence may be granted for the following reasons:

- (1) A provisional or full member deacon needs to seek and secure an appointable primary position—compensated or non salaried.
- (2) A provisional or full member elder, or an associate member needs to transition from an extension ministry to another appointment, or from a local church appointment to an extension ministry appointment.

During transitional leave, the clergyperson shall provide quarterly substantiation of his or her effort to obtain such an appointable position to the bishop and to the Board of Ordained Ministry executive committee.⁴⁷

3. Written request for a voluntary leave of absence, with the exception of transitional leave, should be made at least ninety days prior to the annual conference session giving specific reasons for the request.⁴⁸ Representatives of the annual conference Board of Ordained Ministry may interview the clergy member to determine sufficient cause. Personal leave and family leave shall be approved annually upon written request of the clergy member and personal or family leave shall not be granted for more than five years in succession, except by a two-thirds vote of the clergy members in full connection.⁴⁹ Transitional leave shall not be renewed beyond a twelve-month period. Voluntary leave shall be counted as a part of the eight-year limit for provisional members (¶ 327).⁵⁰



4. Between sessions of the annual conference, voluntary leave of absence may be granted or terminated by the executive committee of the Board of Ordained Ministry after consultation with and approval by the bishop and district superintendents. This interim action shall be subject to the approval of the clergy session of the annual conference at its next session.⁵¹

5. Should there be active complaints or charges, a request for voluntary leave of absence shall not be permitted until those complaints or charges have been resolved.

6. Clergy on voluntary leave of absence shall have no claim on the conference funds. Notwithstanding the foregoing, where the conference has made certain elections under applicable benefit plans that require continued participation by clergy on voluntary leaves of absence, the clergy shall continue to participate in such plans. They may participate in the conference health program through their own contributions, if applicable. However, in exceptional circumstances, on recommendation of the bishop and district superintendents, salary and/or other benefits, subject to the terms of the applicable benefit plans, may be granted to a clergy member, if applicable, by vote of the clergy session of members in full connection with the annual conference. In an interim between sessions of the annual conference, by vote of the bishop, cabinet, and executive committee of the Board of Ordained Ministry, salary and/or benefits, subject to the terms of the applicable benefit plans, may be granted, if applicable.

7. Clergypersons on voluntary leave shall be eligible for membership on annual conference committees, commissions, or boards. They may vote for other clergy delegates to General or jurisdictional conferences and may be elected to serve as delegates themselves.⁵²

8. After consultation and with the written consent of the pastor in charge, and with the approval of the district superintendent and the staff-parish relations committee of a local church, clergy members shall designate a charge conference within the bounds of the annual conference to which they shall relate and submit an annual report. They shall report all marriages performed, baptisms administered, funerals conducted and other ministerial activities to the charge conference, pastor in charge, and Board of Ordained Ministry. The exercise of this ministry shall be limited to the charge conference in which their membership is held and with the written permission of the pastor in charge unless special permission is granted by the bishop of the conference where membership is held. With the permission of the bishop of the conference where membership is held, under the supervision of the district superintendent, the clergy member may preach, teach, perform marriages, and, if holding sacramental privileges, administer the sacraments outside of the charge where membership is held.⁵³

9. Those on voluntary leave of absence shall be held amenable to the annual conference for their conduct and the performance of their ministry. In case of failure to report to the Board of Ordained Ministry, the provisions for administrative location (§ 359) may be invoked.

10. Clergy members on voluntary leave of absence may, with the permission of the bishop and with the approval of the United Methodist Endorsing Agency, continue to hold an existing reserve commission as an armed forces chaplain, but may not voluntarily serve on extended active duty.

11. When an end to voluntary leave of absence is requested, except for transitional leave, it shall be by written request at least six months prior to the session of annual conference. The Board of Ordained Ministry shall review the circumstances surrounding the granting of the leave for the purpose of determining whether those circumstances have been alleviated or resolved. When the board has determined that the circumstances of the voluntary leave have not been alleviated or resolved and the request is denied, the board will inform the person of the remaining options, which include: *a*) remaining on voluntary leave of absence; *b*) taking honorable location; *c*) being recommended to the bishop and district superintendents to be placed on involuntary leave, administrative location, or involuntary retirement, using the fair process of ¶ 361.2; or *d*) such other action as deemed appropriate.

12. When clergy members on voluntary leave of absence do not request an annual extension of the leave of absence during the five-year period or do not indicate willingness to receive an appointment at the end of the five-year period, following documented efforts to make contact with the clergyperson, the provisions of administrative location (¶ 359) may be invoked.

47. See Jurisdictional Council Decisions 450, 459, 508, 1226.

48. See Judicial Council Decision 782.

49. See Judicial Council Decision 689.

50. See Judicial Council Decision 1216.

51. See Judicial Council Decision 689.

52. See Judicial Council Decision 473.

53. See Judicial Council Decision 581.

Frequently Asked Questions About a Voluntary Leave of Absence (VLOA)



To help you better understand the implications of entering into a Voluntary Leave of Absence (VLOA), please take a moment to read through these FAQ's:

Who can apply for VLOA?

- Provisional, Associate, or members in Full Connection of the annual conference.

Are there restrictions on the reasons for taking VLOA?

- Yes. There has to be sufficient reason for you to request VLOA. You cannot just decide to take a break without being able to support the reason you desire to pull back from your ministry for a season of time.

Is there a process I must follow to enter into a VLOA?

- Yes. You must submit an application and detailed explanation of your request at <https://wnc-reg.brtapp.com/LeaveofAbsenceApplication>. After you have submitted your application, someone from the Conference Relations Committee will reach out to you to schedule a follow up meeting.

Who decides if I will be granted VLOA?

- Initially, the Conference Relations Committee will make a recommendation to the full Board of Ordained Ministry and that group will make a recommendation to the Clergy Session who will have the final vote on your request.

Are there different kinds of VLOA?

- Yes. There are three types of VLOA: 1.) Personal Leave; 2.) Family Leave; 3.) Transitional Leave.

What is meant by Personal Leave?

- You must “self-determine” for personal reasons that you are currently unable or unwilling to continue with your current ministry appointment.

- In your written request, you must cite specific reasons why you are unable or unwilling to continue your current ministry appointment.
- The Board of Ordained Ministry, when you seek to come off VLOA will review the reasons that you stated for entering into VLOA. You will be questioned and asked to provide evidence that those reasons have been ameliorated. If they have not, then the Board of Ordained Ministry is not required to grant your request to come off VLOA.

What is meant by the term Family Leave?

- Request for this relationship is more specific in nature. You request this type of leave when there is a family member that needs full time care and this full time care prevents you from continuing ministry in your current appointment.
- You would state this need in the request you include with your application.
- When asking to come off VLOA, you would then indicate that you no longer needed to provide full time care and that you were ready to enter back into a ministry setting.

What is meant by the term Transitional Leave?

- This is a form of VLOA that is granted to persons that temporarily find themselves between appointments. This could be a person transitioning between an extension ministry back into a local church ministry or vice versa.
- This type of VLOA has a time frame on it. It can not last longer than 12 months. If for some reason you were unable to make the transition from one ministry setting to the other ministry setting, then you would need to request a Personal Leave of absence.

When do I apply for a VLOA?

- You must apply, with the exception of transitional leave, at least 90 days prior to the annual conference session and you must give *specific reasons* for making your request.

If I am a provisional member, will entering into a VLOA extend the eight year period during which I must progress into full connection?

- No. It will not extend your eight year limit. It will be counted as a part of that eight year limit.

Will I have to meet with anyone as a part of this process?

- Possibly. Someone from the Conference Relations Committee will follow up with you after you submit your application to let you know if you need to meet with them.

How long will my VLOA last?

- It should be of sufficient length for you to address the issues for which you requested the VLOA.
- If it is a transition leave, then there is a 12 month limit on this type of leave.

- If it is Personal or Family leave, then there is no set time frame in terms of length. However, personal and family leave is approved annually upon a written request from you to the Board of Ordained Ministry. If for some reason your leave will exceed five years, then it will require a 2/3's vote of the clergy session in order to grant the continued leave.

Does a VLOA always have to coincide with the Annual Conference appointive year? (July 1-June 30)

- No. It does not. VLOA may be granted and/or terminated between sessions of the Annual Conference by a vote of the BOM Executive Committee after consultation and approval by the bishop and the district superintendents. Such interim actions will be subject to approval at the next clergy session.
- **PLEASE NOTE**, there is an important relationship that exists between the BOM and the Bishop/Cabinet. It is the BOM that determines your status and gives you your credentials. It is the cabinet that appoints. As a full connection, provisional, or associate member you have guaranteed appointment. However, once you enter into VLOA, your ability to be appointed is put on hold until the BOM certifies that you are once again ready to engage in a ministry setting. Thus, your reasons for entering into a VLOA are important. The BOM will evaluate whether the reasons you entered VLOA have been satisfied before you are presented to the cabinet for appointment.

Is there some reason that would automatically disqualify my request to enter into a VLOA?

- Yes. If there is an active complaint or charge against you, you cannot enter into a VLOA until that complaint or charge has been resolved.

While on VLOA will I still be entitled to receive pension and health benefits?

- The Book of Discipline makes it clear that you “..shall have no claim on the conference funds.”
- This means that you can, however, participate in the clergy health plan for twelve (12) months. It would be at your own expense. Currently, if you are serving a local church, the local church pays a portion of your health care costs and you pay a portion. While on VLOA, you would be required to pay 100% of the health benefit premium. You would also revert to the Lay Plan levels which have a lower cost structure. [Visit this webpage for more pension and health benefits information.](#)
- The only exception to this rule is the ability of the Bishop, Cabinet, BOM and eventually the clergy session to vote to approve continuing/paying the church portion of health insurance benefits.
- In regards to pension, this is a more complicated issue. You would need to speak with someone at Wespath to determine what impact entering into a VLOA would have upon your pensions.

If I am currently serving on an annual conference committee, commission, or board, will I be able to continue to serve while on VLOA?

- Yes. You may continue to serve. In addition, if it is the year we vote for General Conference/Jurisdictional Conference delegates, you may also cast your vote. You are also eligible to be considered as a delegate to either of these conferences.

Will I still be able to administer the sacraments and engage in other ministerial functions such as weddings or funerals?

- Yes. But there are certain limitations that must be observed. As a part of your VLOA, you must declare a charge conference within the bounds of the annual conference. This will be done in conjunction with the district superintendent and the staff pastor parish relations committee of that local church. Each year you will be required to submit a report to that charge conference in which you will list all marriages performed, baptisms administered, funerals conducted, and other ministerial activities. In addition, the report shall be given to the pastor in charge of that church and a copy will be sent to the Board of Ordained Ministry via the Director of Ministerial Services. Your ministry actions are limited to that charge conference unless special permission is given by the Bishop to perform ministerial actions outside the bounds of that charge conference.
- You are amenable to the Board of Ordained Ministry for your conduct and the performance of your ministry while on a VLOA. If you fail to report yearly to the BOM, then provisions for administrative location (§359) may be invoked.

I am currently a reserve armed forces chaplain . Will I be able to continue in that role?

- Yes, but with restrictions. You will need permission of the Bishop and approval of the United Methodist Endorsing Agency. You may not voluntarily serve on extended active duty while on VLOA.

How do I end a VLOA?

- You entered into VLOA with a written request. You will exit in the same manner. However, please note that you must make your request 6 months prior to the session of annual conference. This means that the Board of Ordained Ministry would need to receive your request in early December in order to process your request and make you available for appointment at the upcoming annual conference.
- Your request to come off VLOA should reference the reasons stated in your letter to enter into VLOA and you should clearly indicate to the Board of Ordained Ministry how you feel that those reasons have been dealt with while on VLOA. The Board will review your initial request and your explanation to determine whether or not those situations have been alleviated or resolved.
- If the Board does not feel that these situations have been alleviated or resolved, then the Board will deny your request and offer the following options: a.) remain on voluntary leave of absence; b.) take honorable location; c.) be recommended to the bishop and district superintendents to be placed on involuntary leave, administrative location, or involuntary retirement using Fair Process procedures of §361.2 or d;) such other action as deemed appropriate.

What if I decide not to file yearly reports or will not accept an appointment when my five year period of VLOA comes to an end?


- First of all, failure to provide for an annual extension could result in your being placed on administrative location (§359).
- Likewise, your unwillingness to receive an appointment at the end of the five year period could also result in you being placed on administrative location. (§359)

Other Things to Consider

While the decision to grant a VLOA rests with the Board of Ordained Ministry, there is also a connection to the cabinet that must be considered. The BOM can determine your status/credentials. The BOM can state “We feel that a person is fit for ministry.” However, once you make your request, the Cabinet also needs to evaluate the circumstances. It is possible for the Cabinet to say that prior to your coming off VLOA we expect you to engage in certain activities to help insure that you will be ready and fit for ministry in the eyes of the cabinet. In the event that the cabinet imposes such stipulations, then it is the responsibility of the BOM to consider those requirements along with your letter to request coming off leave.

Historically, the cabinet has required persons while on leave to deal with the issues that led them to request leave of absence. Among the items required have been sessions with a counselor with reports back to the district superintendent. Meetings with financial counselors if there is a money related issue. Attendance at drug and alcohol rehab if that were part of the reason.

Likewise, the Board may also impose stipulations to insure that when you come off a VLOA that the matter leading you into a VLOA has been resolved. It is not helpful to you or the annual conference for you to come back and the problem has not been addressed and resolved.



*16 Therefore we do not lose heart.
Though outwardly we are
wasting away, yet inwardly
we are being renewed day by day.
2 Corinthians 4:16 (NIV)*

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