

Forest Dwelling Program Frequently Asked Questions

After reviewing the answers below, if you have additional questions, please contact us: forestdwelling@ost.edu

or at (210) 341-1366 ext. 320.

WHAT DISTINGUISHES THE FOREST DWELLING PROGRAM FROM OTHER SPIRITUAL FORMATION PROGRAMS?



The goal of the Forest Dwelling Program (FDP) is to prepare participants to live wisely and well during their remaining years so that, in the words of Henry Nouwen, “they might be able to give both their life and death away” for the sake of the world. The FDP is housed in a graduate school setting that offers rigorous academic input, contemporary theology for mature spiritual seekers, and the opportunity for transformational processing in elder circles led by wise and seasoned ammas and abbas (Elder Circle Leaders). We emphasize both content and process as vehicles for spiritual transformation over the course of 2 years. Though housed in an academic setting, it is based on an adult learning model wherein individuals are invited to participate at a level that is in alignment with their personal desires, abilities, and life

circumstances. There are no grades, and no requirements for “passing” the program. A certificate is issued for those who complete the two-year program.

WHY IS THIS PROGRAM DESIGNED TO HAVE IN-PERSON GATHERINGS 4 TIMES OVER THE COURSE OF 2 YEARS?

This program is designed to immerse people in a communal experience which is an essential ingredient in the transformational process. It is impractical for most people to leave home for a full two years, so we intersperse in-person retreats with monthly Zoom communal gatherings. We do this to keep a spacious connection in community over the two years we travel together. Meeting in-person offers the opportunity for both formal and informal interactions between participants, faculty, elder circle leaders and staff. Additionally, the grounds of the Oblate School of Theology provide a perfect retreat setting, and people are free of the many distractions and demands of attending virtually while at home.

IS VIRTUAL ATTENDANCE AN OPTION IF I CANNOT ATTEND ALL THE GATHERINGS IN PERSON?

One of the benefits of the pandemic was the experience that educational and transformational programs can be successfully offered on-line. Though we prefer to have as many participants present at OST as possible, we know that it is not an option for many. Some of you know ahead of time that you will not be able to travel to any of the gatherings, while others may need to miss one or more of them. At this stage of life, we want people to have the freedom and wisdom to decide whether to attend in-person or virtually. This may happen due to health issues, family or work needs, travel issues, or other considerations, and we will do our best to accommodate you. We record all talks and make them available to participant so that if you miss a gathering, you will be able to hear them. When you are not able to attend a gathering, it is wise to speak with your elder circle leader about your circle which will meet 3 times during each in-person gathering. Some options from past cohorts has been to Zoom in the missing circle member, or to record the session with full knowledge and consent to confidentiality from each circle member.

TUITION:

Tuition for this two-year program is \$4,500. We offer discounted tuition for those who wish to pay in advance rather than over the course of two years. We also offer scholarships and extended payment plans at no cost because we do not want people to be turned away from the program due to financial concerns. For a schedule of tuition payments for the upcoming/current cycle, please refer to our webpage: <https://ost.edu/forestdwelling/>

SCHOLARSHIPS:

We offer scholarship assistance based on financial need and funding available for the 2023 – 2024 cohort. Up to \$3,000 can be requested by an applicant for the two-year program. This award will be spread out over the 4 semesters of the program. The information you provide relative to this request will be kept confidential. You can apply for the scholarship on-line when you fill out the application. Although we will start accepting people into the program on July 1, 2022, we will not award specific scholarship amounts until mid-October. This allows us time to see the number of people requesting scholarships relative to the amount of money we have available to award. We encourage you to apply early, indicating your request for scholarship as part of the process. You will not be committed until you receive notification of your award, and decide if that works for your financial situation.

The Forest Dwelling Program, through the generosity of anonymous donors, is able to offer a full-tuition scholarship for (1) Forest Dweller in the 2023-2024 cohort. The intent of this award is to allow attendance for someone without the financial means. Recipients will be nominated for the *Life of Service Scholarship* (LOSS) based on a strong commitment to serving others in capacities such as educator, nurse, caregiver, stay-at-home parent, nonprofit work, and ministries. Recipients will also need to be accepted into the FDP, demonstrating interest and readiness to do the spiritual work of an elder. For more information about the *Life of Service Scholarship*, nomination forms and applications please email our administrative assistant, Emmett Gonzalez (egonzalez@ost.edu)

COSTS TO CONSIDER IN ADDITION TO TUITION:

Transportation expenses will depend upon your mode of travel, and the distance between your home town and San Antonio. Oblate campus is less than 3 miles away from the San Antonio airport. Most hotels around OST offer shuttle service, and taxis or Uber / Lyft are available for travel to OST.

Lodging will be needed for Sunday evening through Friday morning, and is available both on-campus and off. OST has a limited number of rooms available in the Oblate Retreat Center. We generally give priority to those who are traveling from overseas, who have mobility challenges, and those who are willing to share their room with another dweller. There are numerous hotels within a 5-mile radius of OST. We ask for a group rate at a hotel we have worked with in the past, but there are others nearby that are available if you have a specific preference. The hotel we contract with for a special rate generally offers shuttle service to and from the airport, and to and from OST. Of course, you are welcome to reserve a room at other nearby hotels or stay with friends or family. Although the Gathering schedule is full, it allows time for socializing. Dwellers who live in San Antonio are welcome to stay at home and commute, or stay at the hotel nearby. There are usually opportunities for those who cannot afford housing to stay at the home of a current or past dweller (to be arranged on an individual basis.). Others make arrangements with various local religious communities which offer low cost or free accommodations.

Food: Lunches (Monday through Friday) are included in the FDP tuition and will be provided to all Dwellers. Having lunch together serves to build community and offers opportunities for networking. Both breakfast and dinner are the participants' responsibility. We will provide you with information as to local eating establishments. FDP generally provides a reception with appetizers and beverages on Sunday and Thursday evenings.

Books: will be recommended for the Gatherings and for each module. Generally, the number of books per Gathering and semester range from one to three. There is one module during each semester between Gatherings. Book purchases are the responsibility of each student, and generally range from \$12 to \$25. Most of the program's reading materials are available in paperback or Kindle. You are also welcome to borrow books from your local library, if available, and limited copies are available from the OST campus library.

PREREQUISITES:

The Forest Dwelling Program does not ask for any academic or faith-based prerequisites, although preference will be given to applicants who are active spiritual seekers. While the program will draw deeply from the Christian spiritual and mystical tradition, we encourage people of all backgrounds to apply – all faiths, religions, and not-religious-but-spiritual. The most important consideration is that one is already a “mature” spiritual seeker who is open and willing to stretch oneself, and open to the wisdom teachings of the world's great religious and spiritual traditions.

By “mature”, we generally refer to individuals who are well into the second half of life, and, if the applicant has children, approaching or already in the empty-nest phase. This is a ripe period in one's life when spiritual transformation may be nurtured in new ways. It is also helpful that applicants have the time to complete coursework (approximately 30-40 hours per month) and are willing to meet on a regular basis with their Elder Circle throughout the two-year program. An Elder Circle consists of 6-9 students plus an elder circle leader. It is expected that Forest Dwelling participants will also participate in spiritual direction on a regular basis during the duration of the program.

Some of the course material will be delivered via distance learning technology, therefore adequate hardware and basic technology skills are required. This includes regular access to a computer with internet and audio/visual capabilities – including a microphone and webcam for students who will meet online with their Elder Circle. The Forest Dwelling Program has technical support available for all students to help troubleshoot any problems that may arise accessing course content, recordings, or virtual meetings.

TIME COMMITMENT:

In addition to the 6-day Gatherings on campus twice per year in January and June, students can expect to spend approximately 30-40 hours per month for this program, or about 1 hour per day. Fifteen hours per month (about 30 minutes per day) should be spent on contemplative practices such as prayer, meditation, and mindful journaling. The remaining 15-25 hours per month will be divided among formal online classes/webinars, small group processing sessions (Elder Circles), and reading. Small groups (Elder Circles) will meet for approximately 2 hours per month. There will also be a monthly optional discussion group for those who desire to dig deeper into the readings.

SPIRITUAL DIRECTION:

We ask that all Forest Dwelling students remain in spiritual direction for the duration of the 2-year program. If prospective Forest Dwelling students are not already in spiritual direction upon acceptance to the program, we ask that they be in spiritual direction by the beginning of their program cycle. Each student is responsible for finding their own spiritual director, although we are glad to assist with this process if needed.

Suggested resources for finding a spiritual director:

- The Forest Dwelling Program has a list of Spiritual Directors who are familiar with us. You can request this list by emailing us at: forestdwelling@ost.edu
- Use this search tool: <https://www.sdicompanions.org/find-a-spiritual-director-companion/>

- Contact retreat centers in your area, since they usually have spiritual directors.
- If you are Christian, call the diocese in your area and request a list of formed spiritual directors.

USE OF FOREST DWELLING MATERIALS OUTSIDE OF PROGRAM:

All program materials are copyrighted by the author/creator and Oblate School of Theology. Participants may use written program materials as a resource in their personal teaching, with proper attribution.

Participants are not allowed to sell these materials or charge for them in any way. Participants are not allowed to record live program sessions. Teaching sessions during Gatherings are recorded, and available online for viewing by enrolled participants only.

WILL THE ONLINE STUDY BE DESIGNATED FOR CERTAIN TIMES OF THE DAY, OR CAN PARTICIPANTS COMPLETE THE MATERIAL ON THEIR OWN SCHEDULE WITHIN THE OVERALL TIME FRAME OF THE PARTICULAR MODULE?

Most of the day-to-day (between gatherings) study is designed to be flexible to fit your schedule. A couple of things to consider about your study schedule: In addition to the individual work, you will coordinate monthly small-group meeting times with the members of your elder circle.

IS THE FOREST DWELLING PROGRAM APPROPRIATE FOR HOSPICE WORKERS/TRAINERS?

The Forest Dwelling Program is not designed to provide specialized training for hospice workers or trainers. This is the same for people in various ministries and healthcare programs. More specifically, it is a path of personal transformation that participants can integrate and apply to all areas of their life, including vocational areas.

DOES THE PROGRAM REQUIRE A FINAL PROJECT?

All participants will be expected to complete a final “Harvesting Project.” We look at this project as a celebration of the journey, not an evaluation of it. The purpose of the project is to help participants integrate what they have learned over the duration of the program, as well as take what they have learned into their own life and work contexts. Generally, it will be a creative project using media of the students’ choosing. Examples might include artwork, essay, poem, an interactive media offering, or a community engagement project. Successful completion of the program does not depend upon a “product,” but we encourage you to find your own unique and loving expression of your journey.

OPTION TO AUDIT THE FOREST DWELLING PROGRAM?

We do not offer an audit option for this program, particularly because it is not an academic program/course, nor do we provide any kind of grade. At the end of the two years, we present students with a certificate, but it is **not** an academic/accredited certificate.

SCHEDULE FOR THE 6-DAY GATHERINGS IN JANUARY AND JUNE:

The Gatherings at Oblate School of Theology will begin late afternoon Sunday, and will end Friday at approximately noon. We begin and end with an ecumenical liturgy. Students are encouraged to plan their travel around this schedule. We know that travel schedules and personal needs may result in either late arrival or early departure, so we will

record any talks that occur during this time for later viewing. As a general rule, on Monday – Thursday we start at 9 a.m. and end between 4 and 6 p.m. Activities during the six days will include content (talks), process (Elder Circles and discussion), and practice (embodied meditation / contemplative prayer times). We have a 2 hour Sabbath over the lunch break, and evenings are free. The grounds of OST are beautiful and offer many places for contemplative time, including an outdoor grotto, a chapel, a library filled with art, and outdoor seating under the trees. We provide a more-detailed schedule in the month leading up to each Gathering. We also encourage people to listen to the Spirit’s calling, and if taking a nap is needed, so shall you make that loving choice.

AGE RESTRICTIONS / REQUIREMENTS:

While this program is geared towards folks of retirement age, there is no age limit or restricted range of ages we will accept. If you feel called to this program, we encourage you to apply!

Updated 09/19/2022