

Forest Dwelling Program - Frequently Asked Questions

After reviewing the answers below, if you have additional questions, please contact us:

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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.” A certificate is issued for those who complete the two-year program.

WHY IS THIS PROGRAM DESIGNED TO HAVE AN IN-PERSON GATHERING EACH YEAR?

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 gatherings for those who can travel with virtual gatherings. There are also monthly Zoom elder circles for more intimate communal interactions and support. 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 for those who can travel. Additionally, the grounds of the Oblate School of Theology provides a perfect retreat-like 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 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 either of the major gatherings, while others may need to miss one 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 participants so that you can listen later. The “hybrid” experience wherein we have some

Dwellers at OST and some online has allowed us to form an international community that has bonded and flourished despite being unable to meet together in-person.

HOW WILL I BE PLACED IN AN ELDER CIRCLE?

We will survey your preference for a morning, afternoon, or evening meeting time and your current time zone. We will place 6 – 9 people in an Elder Circle based on those answers. We have found it best not to place friends or spouses in the same Elder Circle so both will be in separate circles.

WHO WILL ATTEND THE JANUARY AND JUNE GATHERINGS?

Only those admitted to the FDP will attend, along with elder circle leaders, faculty, invited speakers and staff.

ARE THERE OPTIONS IF I WANT THE INFORMATION BUT CANNOT COMMIT TO A TWO-YEAR PROGRAM AT THIS TIME?

You may attend session talks (January – May & August – November) as an enrichment student. In this status you will attend weekly talks, but will not have access to the January and June Gatherings or the elder circles. You can sign up for 1 or all of the sessions. You may also sign up for the session talks as a graduate student to receive academic credit. Contact Emmett Gonzalez (egonzalez@ost.edu) for more information.

I AM ENROLLED IN THE FDP SESSION FOR ACADEMIC CREDIT. CAN I JOIN THE GATHERINGS AND ELDER CIRCLES?

You must apply and be accepted to the Forest Dwelling Program to be eligible to attend the gatherings and Elder Circles. An additional fee may be assessed in addition to your academic tuition.

I AM ENROLLED IN AS AN ENRICHMENT STUDENT. CAN I JOIN THE GATHERINGS AND ELDER CIRCLES?

No, you must be enrolled in the Forest Dwelling Program to attend gatherings and Elder Circles.

I AM NOT IN THE SECOND HALF (OR THIRD ACT) OF LIFE, BUT I MINISTER TO OR WORK WITH THOSE WHO ARE. CAN I JOIN THE FDP?

We recommend that you either sign up as an Enrichment Student or for academic credit so that you are able to access the content which will be of great benefit in your work. We have found that it is essential for elder circles that you are in the stage of life where the issues that arise in processing the material will be more relevant.

CAN ENROLLED FOREST DWELLERS ALSO RECEIVE ACADEMIC CREDIT?

Enrolled Forest Dwellers can receive academic credit for the (4) FDP sessions for an additional cost. Contact Emmett Gonzalez (egonzalez@ost.edu) for more information.

TUITION:

Tuition for this two-year program is \$4,770. 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 see below:

Tuition Deposit: \$500.00 – Due upon acceptance

3 payment options:

- 1 payment of \$4,293.00 (10% discount) due by:
 - 1 December 2024
- 2 payments of \$2,265.75 (5% discount) due by:
 - 1 December 2024
 - 1 December 2025
- 4 payments of \$1,192.50 (no discount) due by:
 - 1 December 2024,
 - 1 May 2025,
 - 1 December 2025
 - 1 May 2026

**** Students who would benefit from smaller, more frequent payment plans can set up a monthly payment plan with the Business Office. No discounts are offered when electing to enroll in a payment plan ****

SCHOLARSHIPS:

We offer scholarship assistance based on financial need and funding available for the (2025 – 2026) 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 reviewing completed applications on 30 June 2024, **we will not award specific scholarship amounts until mid-November**. 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 (2025 – 2026) 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 (L.O.S.S.)** 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.

Lodging will be needed for Sunday evening through Friday morning for gatherings, and is only available off campus. In an effort to ensure affordable lodging for campus visitors, FDP partners with TownePlace Suites and Aloft Hotel to offer a special *FDP Rate*. For additional information please contact Emmett Gonzalez (egonzalez@ost.edu). There are numerous other hotels within a 5-mile radius of OST, 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. Forest Dwellers are also welcome to stay with their family / friends / local personal connections. Dwellers who live in San Antonio are welcome to stay at home and commute, or stay at a hotel nearby. Others make arrangements with various local religious communities which offer low cost or free accommodations.

Food: Lunches (Monday through Thursday) 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 of the four sessions of talks. Book purchases are the responsibility of each student. 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.

TIME COMMITMENT:

In addition to the Gatherings, students can expect to spend approximately 1.5-2 hours weekly to listen to talks during the months when in session (January – May & August – November). Participants are encouraged but not *required* to listen to all talks. There may be times when it is difficult to listen when the talk is first offered. It is an option to catch up on recordings in the summer and in December when new talks will not be presented. We recommend spending about 30 minutes daily on contemplative prayer practices, meditation and mindful journaling whenever possible. Additionally, once per month you will attend a 2-hour elder circle, and those who desire may attend a one-hour discussion group for those who desire to dig deeper into session content.

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 access this list at: <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1Wvm-mf4nEie-7X-loT8ouGO1cmeWY4Bm/view?usp=sharing>
- 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.

DO FOREST DWELLERS RECEIVED ANY ADDITIONAL BENEFITS AS OST STUDENTS?

As an OST student, you will have the following benefits:

- Free attendance at any OST Continuing Education events (both in-person and on-line)
- Access to the Donald E. O'Shaughnessy Library located on OST campus.
- Enrollment in eligible graduate level classes as an Enrichment Student (check with registrar for current fees and schedules**).

Important note: *If for any reason a participant needed to withdraw from the program prior to completion, the participant is responsible for payment of all tuition scheduled to be paid prior to the date Oblate School of Theology receives your written request for withdrawal.*

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. All teaching sessions are recorded, and available for viewing by enrolled participants only.

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.

GENERAL GATHERING SCHEDULE FOR JANUARY AND JUNE 2025 / 2026:

(Sunday) January 5th through (Friday) January 10th 2025

(Monday) June 2nd through (Friday) June 6th 2025

(Sunday) January 4th through (Friday) January 9th 2026

(Monday) June 1st through (Friday) June 5th 2026

The January 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 or five days will include content (talks), process (Elder Circles and discussion), and praxis (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 also encourage people to listen to the Spirit’s calling, and if taking a nap is needed, so shall you make that loving choice. The June gatherings will have a similar schedule except that they will start on Monday morning at 9AM (instead of Sunday evening) and occur entirely online. We provide a more detailed schedule in the month leading up to each Gathering.



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