

Congregational Discernment

Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ)

What is discernment?

Discernment is a stance that we cannot go forward without God's wisdom; that we cannot meet our challenges completely on our own. It is a practice of sacred listening. A way of seeing God as an active agent in the world and then developing practices for attending to God's agency in our lives and in our organizations.

What is a discernment process, and how is it different from traditional decision making?

A discernment process is similar and different from the more familiar decision-making processes that are often used in business, church, and home life.

A **decision-making** process primarily utilizes logical thinking and rational discourse. It assumes we have the capacity to know and solve our own problems if we maximize resources and maintain order. A deciding approach relies heavily on the mind, the head center. It defines a problem, identifies root causes, gathers and evaluates data, brainstorms options, establishes decision criteria, evaluates risks, and selects an optimal solution. Parliamentary procedures, majority rules, and decision trees are the primary tools. Often authorized leaders do this work on behalf of the whole organization.

A **discernment** process assumes that God is not neutral about our mission or choices. Susan Beaumont writes that, "In group discernment, participants adopt a stance of indifference to anything but the will of the divine as discovered by the group, setting aside matters of ego, politics, opinion, and personal interest." A discerning approach invites wisdom to emerge from all our body centers including our minds (heads), emotions (heart), and intuition (gut). A discerning approach frames an issue for discernment, grounds in core values and guiding principles, sheds ego and bias, listens for the promptings of the spirit, explores and weighs the options, and rests the selection before moving forward. Prayer, spiritual practice, scripture, group listening and storytelling, and consensus processes are the primary tools. All parties invested in the issue at hand can be invited to do this work collectively.

True or False: the Congregational Discernment Task Force will make decisions on behalf of the church.

False. The Task Force is charged with designing a process to engage the congregation in shared discernment about the church's resources, capacity, and future. The Task Force's primary task is to create opportunities for deep listening and connection among the congregation. The hope is to find a shared answer to this framing question: ***Reflecting on where we are now, what changes in***

form and direction is God calling Olivet to make? They will gather input, identify common themes, articulate possible options, and seek feedback. The hope is that through this process of discernment, some consensus will emerge about God's call to Olivet in this time. The Task Force reports to the Council, and the Council may decide to bring recommendations from the Task Force to the larger congregation. The Task Force and the Council will work together to ensure follow-through and follow-up regarding the congregation's decisions.

How will information be communicated?

The Task Force recognizes that it is very important for the church to understand what is happening, when it is happening, and how to be involved. The weekly e-newsletter will be an important tool for staying informed. Please read it! You may also be contacted directly by phone or email. The Task Force will also make a special effort to reach out to people in our community who are homebound or prefer other methods of communication. You are encouraged to reach out to any member of the Task Force with questions/concerns. They may request your permission to bring your questions/concerns back to the Task Force in order to form a thoughtful response.

Didn't we do this already with Michael Fritz?

Olivet engaged in some meaningful consideration about the future with Reverend Michael Fritz, and the congregation pursued some of the options available at that time. While many of the big questions and concerns remain the same, our situation has changed in five years. The Task Force hopes to build on the Fritz process while integrating new realities about our resources, capacity, and context.

Is there a deadline for the congregational discernment process?

The congregation will need to vote on a budget at the January 2026 Annual Meeting, and the Task Force hopes to make meaningful progress by the end of 2025. However, it is hard to predict exactly how the process will unfold because it involves listening deeply to the voices of the congregation and paying attention to the movement of the Spirit in our midst. The Task Force will always strive to be in communication with the Council and the congregation about its progress.

What is my role in the congregational discernment process?

Members and regular participants in Olivet are vital to this process; the more people engage faithfully, the more effective it will be. Please thoughtfully and prayerfully consider what God might be calling Olivet to do. We ask that you engage with one another and with the Task Force members with respect, curiosity, and openness to multiple points of view. Listen for understanding, rather than immediately preparing a counterpoint. Group discernment can be a deeply meaningful way to connect with fellow community members.