



## **After the Fact | Restoring Community: Celebrating Diversity**

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### **TRANSCRIPT**

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**Tameeka Washington, president, Interfaith Coalition of Bowie:** We were gathered out here together as a community to say this cannot happen here. And we are gonna stand together. It brought tears to my eyes seeing the rallies around the world. Seeing people in countries everywhere with signs saying that we stand together. And, so, we wanted to do the same thing here in Bowie.

**Dan LeDuc, host:** Welcome to “After the Fact.” For The Pew Charitable Trusts, I’m Dan LeDuc. This episode marks our last in a series on community building in America. There are lots of reasons for people to gather together: It can be over shared interests or wanting to help others. It can be a reaction to a terrible event that makes you hurt, seek the solace of others, and maybe try to find ways to keep those terrible things from happening again.

That’s what happened to Tameeka Washington, who you heard just a moment ago. The murder of George Floyd at the hands of police in Minneapolis in 2020 left her feeling the need to gather others. To build community.

We met with Tameeka in Allen Pond Park in Bowie, Maryland, where she helped organize an event that brought different parts of her community together to talk about race and social justice. She didn’t know it at the time, but she was planting the first seeds for a future organization.

**Tameeka:** This is where we had our first rally. Everyone came out and it was really the beginning of something that I didn’t imagine. There were probably around a hundred people here. The mayor provided opening remarks. We had young people speak.

We had singers, we had politicians, we had faith leaders. People were out there with signs from all across the community. You could see different faiths showing up.

**Dan:** Community and faith coming together in unexpected ways. That brings us to our data point. The Pew Research Center found that regular participation in a religious community is linked with higher levels of happiness. That also translates to greater civic engagement. In the United States,



69% of people who are religiously active say they always vote in national elections, compared to 48% who are religiously unaffiliated. That idea of taking action was also important to Tameeka.

**Tameeka:** And at the end of the day, one of our faith leaders said, now that we've prayed, what do we do next? Because this can't be the end of this conversation. Because there's more to be done.

**Tameeka:** First, I thought about what questions I had. And one of the first questions I had is, "Where is God in all of this?" And, so, I said, "Well, let's have a conversation about that."

Let's have an interfaith dialogue. So, we had faith leaders come in and give their perspective about faith and perseverance through times of distress. This really was the beginning of the conversation.

We had adults, we had young people sharing their faiths because I was like, if I was a kid at this age, and, and I'm hearing all these different things and these different conversations, I have questions about what do they believe? So, let's have them share their faith. We had middle schoolers, we had high schoolers, we had college students. I think after the third or fourth round of events, Rabbi Steve said, we should do something here. We should form some sort of nonprofit.

**Dan:** Steve Weisman, or Rabbi Steve, is the leader of his congregation at Temple Solel and the chair of the Interfaith Coalition of Bowie, or ICB.

He told us about how this interfaith work got started.

**Steve Weisman, rabbi, Temple Solel and chair, ICB:** The response to that was, I think, extraordinary under the circumstances. We had something like 150, 200 people out at Allen Pond Park on a Sunday afternoon. And that was actually how Tameeka and I met, was working on that project.

**Dan:** That was just the start of their relationship.

**Steve:** But a bunch of us got to talking afterward because for a lot of us, this was the first time we were all meeting each other and all getting to work together. And we'd sort of become claustrophobic in our own hiding and dealing with our own communities. And Tameeka and I just started to talk that afternoon before we both left the park. And I got a phone call within a day or two from Tameeka following up the conversation saying, so what does this community need?

**Dan:** Rabbi Steve saw Tameeka's vision and encouraged her to turn this conversation into action.



**Steve:** We sit down and we brainstorm stuff and it happens. You need a worker, somebody with vision and the connections and the ability to get things done. Who's willing to fail. I think that's one of the big things in this work.

**Dan:** But Tameeka wasn't going to do it alone.

**Steve:** We sat down, she said, can I ask you to be the chairman of the board? I said, "You can. I'd like to say no." She said, "Why?" I said, "Because I think it should be a lay person." She said, "I get it, but for now?" And, so, we agreed on that, and you know, it was pretty clear that by doing that, that I was committing.

**Dan:** This interfaith work began to draw others in—parents, schools, and other faith leaders.

Tameeka saw an opportunity to bring younger people into the discussion. That led to the creation of a Vacation Interfaith School. Here's Rabbi Steve on the value of the program.

**Steve:** We realized that those who were most likely to still be doing vacation bible schools were doing it as part of their education of their kids internally.

And some of those programs are great and really open and positive, and some of them are really insular and reinforce the stereotypes that lead to some other things that maybe some of us would prefer aren't being reinforced.

And this was an opportunity to use a model that people already know and are looking for, and sort of to just invert it on its ear and make everybody think about it. A chance for us to go out directly and work with parents and kids together to provide something of value to parents directly.

And to do it in a way that was gonna reinforce what we were trying to make our brand and our message, which was understanding each other better through experience and through knowledge and working together.

**Tameeka:** Kids come and they learn about different faiths. And then we can have these conversations about what are our differences and what are our shared values? We did that last summer. We did a United Parish of Bowie, we did Village Baptist, and then we did the Diyanet Center in Lanham, because there's no mosque here in Bowie.

**Dan:** Hannah Deacon is a fourth-grader who was part of the first camp. I asked her about meeting children from other faiths.



**Hannah:** Every time it rains, I look for a rainbow. Because I like all the colors.

**Dan:** I love all those colors, too.

**Hannah:** Happy is yellow. Sick is green? Sad is blue. Kind of happy is purple. Uh, that's it. OK. That's all I got.

**Dan:** That's all you got. What is it about learning about people that make you want to like them more?

**Hannah:** They learn new things and we learn new things.

You get to know them better and maybe you could talk about them. Maybe you have the same things they have. Maybe we have some similarities.

**Dan:** The students also have a chance to visit other faith spaces during the vacation school.

**Tameeka:** We had them touring the sacred spaces. So they're clambering into the baptismal pool. They're playing on the organ. And it gets them an opportunity to be in those spaces without having to be dressed up in uncomfortable clothes and sit quietly and behave. They can be kids and laugh. And then we had a craft that just talked about the different beliefs of the faith. And then the critical point was the snack, right? Because if there's no snack, there's a problem.

**Dan:** The ICB hopes to draw more youngsters to the vacation school. Part of building community is a natural curiosity in those around you.

**Tameeka:** For them, I really would like to see that they not only are curious, but that they're actively curious.

I want that curiosity to be more action-oriented and really thinking about not just who someone is, but why they are that way. How can I help them? How can I be a better person? This year we're partnering with Kids for Kids Foundation, and they have a program that focuses on philanthropy. So, they'll have these conversations about what their role is in the community and what part do they play and can they play even at this young age.

The work that we're doing for the vacation bible school this year and that partnership, talking about what giving looks like, thinking about being a philanthropist, is really important in instilling that early. And then at the end of the program, the kids will pick an organization to provide a donation to.



**Dan:** From your perspective, what are those next steps beyond that, that start to create and build community?

**Tameeka:** I think it really is about giving each other space for conversation. People tend to have questions. They're curious. They have concerns. They want a place to talk about those concerns in a safe way.

So, for instance, last year there were groups leaving anti-Semitic literature in people's driveways. And then there were a series of bomb threats against HBCUs across the country, including Bowie State. And, so, we had a rally in March, just sort of the same sort of concept.

And, so, what we wanted to do this year is really create space to say why is this happening? We always tend to come together and say, this is not who we are as a community, but if there are people who think that way in our communities, how can we give practical ways in having conversations with them to talk through what their beliefs are and what their concerns are? And one of the pieces of that is we did a youth essay because we wanted to hear their ideas, right?

These kids sent great ideas about things they're struggling with, bullying or someone is biracial and so people are calling them names. They're talking about how the community can help them navigate through that. And one idea was about, come and be a sixth-grader for a day and see the things that we go through.

And then talking about having diversity conversations. These are coming from sixth-, seventh-, eighth-graders. You give them the space to create those kind of connections and then that's how you have that sense of community over time.

**Dan:** Rabbi Steve drew on his experience as a person of Jewish faith and why it's crucial that his community is part of the larger community in Bowie, Maryland.

You have used the words internal and external several times to refer to all of this, and I'm really intrigued by that because, yes, it's important for you to have a very strong faith community in, in your temple. I recognize that. But your mission seems to be the external, and that's where it seems the broad community is built. You've acknowledged, sometimes there's skepticism when religious communities are trying to do that, but when it works, what's it feel like when it starts to click?

**Steve:** There's nothing better. There's nothing better because it allows you to see the world through a set of eyes that we very rarely give ourselves the chance to see with. And what I've started to recognize is the distinction between the internal self and the external self is exactly the same as the difference between the in-group discussion and the larger community



discussion. So, for me, as a rabbi to succeed within my community, here, within my congregation, we have to, in the modern world, convince people that there's a reason to hitch their wagon with us.

**Dan:** By going external and working in the broader community, you're also serving an internal purpose.

**Steve:** Exactly. It's about what is in the best interest of Temple Solel is to be part of a diverse, larger community, respected, recognized, that allows people to see us for who we are. So, how do we present what makes Judaism unique in a way that is both exciting for its difference, but also grounded in the idea that we do have common origins? We do have common beliefs, but we're different, without over-emphasizing the differences.

**Dan:** Embracing and respecting differences. And working together as a community.

**Steve:** We're a community where when you see a swastika spray-painted on the side of the gym on a Sunday morning, your first thought isn't, this is an anti-Semitic act. Your first thought, honestly, in this community is some of the local young people were a little bit bored and looking to get some response. Until there's evidence to support it, I'm gonna be concerned. I'm gonna make some phone calls and send some emails behind the scenes to let people know what's going on. You know, we're gonna sit and we're gonna be patient and we're gonna work with the police and, and city hall and find out what we're dealing with. And I think that goes a long way to seeing both the reality of this community and its success in working together.

**Dan:** For Tameeka, faith goes beyond one religion, but is a concept of a greater shared understanding between one another. Here she is at Allen Pond Park.

**Tameeka:** I think when we focus on something bigger than ourselves, no matter what we call it, it elevates the conversation. And then it helps keep the animosity out of the conversation. So, if you're talking about disagreements, but the underlying foundation is faith, that disagreement is only gonna go so far. You're gonna pull yourself back and say, OK, this person means me well and we have shared values. It really is the lens that keeps us grounded and keeps us kind.

**Dan:** You just said, you can think or assume even that, that person means me well, sometimes people don't assume that. But it's wonderful that you feel comfortable here saying that. How do we get people to start maybe taking that first step of being that way just with the other person?

**Tameeka:** It really is building up that trust, and that's what we're hoping with the coalition is sort of build that trust over time. Just like with the vacation interfaith school, there were people who



came who said, I like that you're not trying to convert me to your faith. You're just trying to show me different faiths.

We're hoping even if you are skeptical about faith, you'll be like, I know the ICB means me well. I see them active in the community. Even if I don't agree with them on this, I know that their intentions are good.

What I have to do is remember to stay open, stay loving, stay kind, and then let God do the rest. We're not just looking to bring you to our faith, but we're looking to see what you need and to help get that to you so that we can build that relationship over time.

**Dan:** Thanks for listening. If you'd like to see and read about some of the people who are restoring community in America today, go to [pewtrusts.org/after the fact](https://pewtrusts.org/after-the-fact). And if you haven't already, please subscribe to "After the Fact" wherever you listen to us—that will make sure you know about our next episodes. For the Pew Charitable Trusts, I'm Dan LeDuc, and this is "After the Fact."