

# Oak Ridge Periodic Tables

## Case Study

September 2024

### Introduction

Pluralism can be hard to understand, much less imagine in practice. To start building the ecosystem's collective understanding of what pluralism looks like—knowing it can take nearly infinite forms—New Pluralists supported the development of [four case studies of pluralism in practice](#). These case studies will start to bridge the gap between theoretical concepts and real-world applications, providing tangible examples of how people across the country are practicing a different way of being and making decisions together. These practical illustrations not only enrich our understanding of pluralism's nuances and challenges but also serve as valuable learning tools for individuals, community leaders, and organizations interested in practicing pluralism themselves.

**One example of pluralism in practice is the work of Oak Ridge Periodic Tables in Oak Ridge, Tennessee.** This case study draws on an interview with Pastor David Allred, executive director, and a focus group with five community members who have engaged with the work of Oak Ridge Periodic Tables (see appendix for a full list of case study participants).

*This case study is one of four exploring diverse practices, approaches, and ideologies in pluralism work. As you read, remember that these are real-world examples of organizations with different worldviews engaging in pluralistic efforts. The goal is not to agree with every perspective presented, but to appreciate the variety of ways and people involved in this work. This case study represents one approach to pluralism among many, highlighting the diversity inherent in the ecosystem.*

### FOUR CASE STUDIES

**This case study is part of a broader evaluation** to understand the current state of pluralism in the United States, including [evaluating the health and vibrancy of the pluralism ecosystem](#) and [assessing the status of key conditions that promote or inhibit pluralism](#).

**It is one of four case studies produced to explore instances of pluralism in practice**—what it looks like, what it accomplishes, and what we're learning about what works and what doesn't work in practicing pluralism. The four case studies are intended to represent diverse approaches to pluralism work. The audience for them is curious ecosystem actors who want to learn more about pluralism.

**Pluralism is both a worldview and a practice.** As a worldview, pluralism is the belief that the coexistence of diverse opinions, ways of life, and value systems enriches all members of a society and that all people deserve to be recognized, respected, accepted, and engaged based on their diversity. As a practice, pluralism invites us to work creatively and collaboratively with the diversity we encounter in life—across races, ethnicities, creeds, religions, political affiliations, genders, sexual orientations, cultures, socioeconomic statuses, individual experiences, beliefs, and actions.

# Context and Overview

**Known as the “secret city,” Oak Ridge, Tennessee, was formed in 1942 during World War II to create the atomic bomb that would land on Hiroshima in August 1945.** It was only the morning after the Hiroshima detonation when the majority of this city’s residents learned what they’d been working on and why the city had remained secret.

Oak Ridge is a scientific city built during the Jim Crow era, and this history has affected the city’s form and identity in profound ways. The city was home to some of the highest number of PhDs in the country and to many families who descended from farmers, moonshiners, and laborers who were relegated to live in less desirable parts of the city in homes with poorer construction than the houses built for scientists and engineers. In 1955, the Scarboro neighborhood was a community of mostly poor Black families, and the Scarboro School was the only elementary, middle, and high school for Black students. In September 1955—following the *Brown v. Board of Education* Supreme Court decision that deemed school segregation based on race unconstitutional—85 Scarboro School students made history when they walked into the then all-White junior high and high school, the first school in the South to desegregate. The city contains generations of stories and perspectives on what it means to belong in Oak Ridge that, until recently, have remained untold.

**Oak Ridge Periodic Tables emerged in 2017 from a deep need to reckon with the city’s history—both its triumphs and its tragedies—amid increasing political polarization in the United States.** Led by Pastor David Allred, the vision of Oak Ridge Periodic Tables is to create opportunities where Oak Ridge residents can engage in deep conversation around a meal to surface untold stories of the past, grapple with current tensions, and strengthen relationships across divides. The COVID-19 pandemic and racial reckoning of 2020 further fueled the need for Oak Ridge residents to come together and engage in conversations about the inequities that many residents still face today.

To build toward this vision, Oak Ridge Periodic Tables takes a three-pronged approach:

- 1 **Equip community leaders** with the skills and tools to facilitate challenging conversations.
- 2 **Convene community members across differences** to share a meal and engage in challenging conversations and storytelling, as well as deepen their connections and trust.
- 3 **Leverage insights from conversations to identify solutions** that promote fair outcomes for all Oak Ridge residents.

The following case study provides more detail about Oak Ridge Periodic Tables’ approach to the work, its impact to date, and what its leaders and participants are learning along the way.

## Approach

**Build capacity in local leaders and institutions.** Oak Ridge Periodic Tables works to **equip community leaders** or “Resourcers” with the skills and knowledge needed to facilitate challenging conversations with honesty and transparency in relatively neutral community spaces, such as church fellowship halls, outdoor parks, and public transportation. Pastor Allred described the method of Oak Ridge Periodic Tables as a “toolset” that community leaders are trained to use and apply to conversations they facilitate around any topic that’s creating fractures or tension. Rather than build Oak Ridge Periodic Tables as a standalone organization, he hopes to embed this practice within other community organizations and local institutions. He said, “*We are here to provide existing*

nonprofits with a toolset that works,” and he described working with groups like the [Scarboro 85 Monument committee](#), the [Oak Ridge Disability Advisory Board](#), the [Anderson County Family Justice Center](#), and different programs with [United Way of Anderson County](#).

**Surface collective wisdom by designing for diversity.** Before facilitating an Oak Ridge Periodic Table, Resourcers ensure that the right people are invited to participate in the conversation. Resourcers curate a group of people with lived experience of the issue being discussed. Considered by the Resourcers as “experts” in the matter, these people range from the formerly homeless to survivors of domestic violence to someone who has experienced racism firsthand. Resourcers ensure that the room includes people with diverse (and sometimes opposing) views who can contribute to the collective wisdom. During conversations, facilitators reflect on questions such as: Where is power held? What are the barriers to engagement? How has our community tried to resolve the issue before? Which values resonate and with which groups of people? In this way, Resourcers are taught to analyze group dynamics; understand people’s perspectives and their experience in the world, as well as bridge connections between experiences; and navigate any barriers that could inhibit honest and transparent conversation. Pastor Allred also described Resourcers as being able to hold space and tension in conversations. He explained: *“When it comes to the work of community, oftentimes we have to move through the mess of humanity to get to the places where we can actually have conversations and it may mean disruption and allowing the mess to exist long enough. [I]t takes special people to hold tension like that, and that’s what these Resourcers are getting trained to do.”*

**Create environments that honor shared humanity.** Equipped Resourcers **convene community members across differences**—people from varying political ideologies and racial and ethnic identities and with different levels of ability and perspective—around food in strategic, neutral settings where folks can approach hard topics from a place of shared humanity. Topics discussed vary from building trust among the Black community in Oak Ridge through racial bridging work to addressing food deserts in the community. In these conversations, creating an environment that feels safe for everyone is important, starting with [community agreements](#), using “I” statements, and honoring people’s differences.

**Personal stories unlock empathy and better solutions.** In describing successful conversations, Pastor Allred talked about the role of personal stories in coming up with solutions to community problems. To further exemplify this idea, he told the story of facilitating an Oak Ridge Periodic Table around the opioid epidemic in Oak Ridge. In this conversation, Pastor Allred described a member from the rowing association in Oak Ridge, sharing that she grew up around drug addiction and athletics and rowing provided her an outlet from being around drugs after school. It was her personal story that helped her sympathize with others who’ve also been affected by drugs and think about the role that athletics and after-school activities can have in preventing drug addiction in young people. Being able to approach the issue from the perspective of a young person as well as a community problem-solver allowed her to put herself in multiple shoes and solve problems from a place of empathy.

**It’s not just talk; conversations enable groups to move through conflicts and find previously concealed solutions.** Through community conversations, Resourcers **leverage insights from conversations to identify solutions that promote fair outcomes for all Oak Ridge residents.** Pastor Allred talked about how courageous conversations create opportunities for serendipitous connection and community—that is, connecting with someone you wouldn’t otherwise connect with—and he described this connection as critical to a group’s ability to come up with social change solutions (see “Impact” section for examples). He also talked about the importance of holding space in conversations for conflict so people can move through it toward a space of problem-solving. He said, *“There is a sense of which you almost have to come into a conflict in order to grow ... and this city is designed to not allow this to happen*

*because we are in such a dangerous predicament if mistakes are made at a scientific level”—connecting the challenge of embracing conflict with the scientific history of Oak Ridge as the place where people worked on developing the atomic bomb that ended World War II.*

**Experience is the best teacher.** Pastor Allred shared a notable story of the role that serendipity played in a conversation about the play *The Mountaintop* by Katori Hall about Dr. Martin Luther King’s last 24 hours before his assassination. In this story, Pastor Allred discussed how the topic of neighborhood policing came up, and one White-identifying community member shared her realization that she had had fewer encounters with the Oak Ridge police than Black residents who know officers by name. This “Aha!” moment enabled a more organic discussion about the issue of over-policing in Black neighborhoods. He said, *“I think you can teach it and you can agree with it intellectually but then your heart is not really in it until it’s come at you through the back door ... and all of a sudden it’s like ‘whoa, ok, now this is really what they mean.’”*

In terms of longer-term impact, Pastor Allred hopes to see: (1) community recognition that the whole is greater than the sum of its parts—that is, that the community of Oak Ridge is better and stronger together; and (2) the Oak Ridge Periodic Table toolset socialized more widely within the city. When these goals are realized, the people of Oak Ridge have the relationships, skills, and creativity they need to come up with solutions for community problems.

## Impact

Pastor Allred and focus group community participants shared the impact of this work in terms of changes they’ve noted in their communities, as well as in themselves. At the community level, changes include:

**Hearing and healing stories of the past.** The [Scarboro 85 Monument Project’s](#) aim is to build a monument to commemorate the bravery of 85 students who desegregated the public school system in Oak Ridge in 1955. In their partnership with the Monument Project, Oak Ridge Periodic Tables has facilitated community conversations to socialize the untold stories of what it was like for the 85 students to lead the effort to desegregate, as well as to bring healing to those individuals who still reside in the Oak Ridge community today. John, a focus group participant, said: *“The pain of what they went through is still fresh on them, even though it’s almost 70 years later. When they talk, you can see the emotions that [it] drums up ... but through that process I think it has given them a voice to where healing has taken place.”* He continued, saying that as part of this project, they’ve worked with Oak Ridge High School students to bring younger community members into the reconciliation and healing work because *“the torch has to be passed somewhere, and what better way to bring them in [than] when they’re young and fresh and able to take our steps?”*

- Oak Ridge Periodic Tables has consistently worked alongside the Scarboro 85 Monument Project to socialize the story of the Scarboro 85. In 2024, the history of the 85 students who desegregated the school in 1955 is now part of the school curriculum for the entire state of Tennessee and is incorporated into textbooks.”

**Amplifying the voice of disabled residents in Oak Ridge to create fairer city policies around access.** Marian, another focus group participant, talked about her work to create the [Disability Advisory Board for the City of Oak Ridge](#). She talked about sharing a personal story with City Council about wanting to walk independently to her nearby church with her guide dog, but 100 yards of sidewalk were missing. Her explanation of all the things she had done to get the city of Oak Ridge to fix the sidewalk made a compelling case to City Council that creating a Disability Advisory Board was necessary to make Oak Ridge more accessible to its residents. Today, Marian sits on the Disability Advisory Board, helping to give a voice to people with disabilities in Oak Ridge that haven’t had one in the past.

Since the establishment of this advisory board, Oak Ridge Periodic Tables has worked with the advisory board to connect them to the broader disability community of Oak Ridge. Oak Ridge Periodic Tables has facilitated community conversations to discuss issues related to access for the disability community in Oak Ridge. Insights from these conversations have been shared with the Disability Advisory Board to strengthen their policy work. Disability Advisory Board Members, including Marian, have also participated in Oak Ridge Periodic Table conversations. The work of Oak Ridge Periodic Tables has made it possible to empower more disabled residents to share their stories and influence city policies around access.

**Helping community organizations mitigate burnout and operationalize their mission more effectively.** Oak Ridge Periodic Tables supports community organizations—such as the [Oak Ridge Chamber of Commerce](#)—by helping ignite the staff’s passion and motivation for the work. They do this by encouraging staff members to bring their whole selves into the work and reconnect to what brought them to the work they do. Pastor Allred said, *“Even as nonprofit leaders, we can get so wrapped up in the work and forget the humanity of it ... so ultimately, pluralism is that I can bring my full humanity to the table.”* Pastor Allred also told the story of working with a local nonprofit around their childcare program and convening their executive director and staff. In this conversation, the work of Oak Ridge Periodic Tables helped to motivate staff to continue providing childcare services to the Oak Ridge community and to do their work more effectively. Pastor Allred said: *“Too often we can get locked down into ‘efficiency mode,’ which helps our nonprofits look great on paper and secure funding. But at the end of the day, it is the ‘Why?’ of our work that sustains through funding cycles and keeps us drinking at the well of creativity to surface better solutions to community issues.”*

As a member and partner to the Oak Ridge community, Oak Ridge Periodic Tables has contributed to these community successes—it has brought people together that wouldn’t otherwise convene and helped people to connect on a deeper level, heal community divides, and be able to collaborate better on important social issues.

At the individual level, changes include:

**Deepening people’s ability to listen and understand others.** All focus group participants, whether they participated in or facilitated courageous conversations, talked about being able to *“let their guard down”* through Oak Ridge Periodic Table discussions and listen more deeply. Phyllis, one of the focus group participants, talked about being patient with others and really listening to their stories to understand rather than respond. Another focus group participant, Naomi, talked about believing that she understood the Oak Ridge community well given her work in social services, but she shared that during an Oak Ridge Periodic Table conversation she was able to see a *“completely different community because [she] was seeing it through somebody else’s eyes.”* She also acknowledged the importance of trusting and empowering others to figure out solutions to their own problems through listening.

**Helping people feel more respected.** Marian talked about her advocacy work to improve access for people with disabilities in Oak Ridge and how her involvement with Oak Ridge Periodic Tables helped her feel more respected and valued as an expert in disability work.

**Increasing individual feelings of safety.** Phyllis talked about how misinformation about how Black people were believed to be *“less than human”* during the Jim Crow era could impact how others treat her today. She said, *“Conversations created and expanded my sense of safety not only in the room, but also outside of the room, because the ... successful ability to have civil conversations about an important topic would linger outside of the room.”* She followed by saying, *“What if it’s true that we’re actually hungry for each other ... not only interested in eating a meal but also hungry for these authentic connections, and so all of that contributes to increasing my sense of safety.”*

**Helping people to be courageous.** Oak Ridge Periodic Tables conversations helped focus group members to be brave and unafraid to make mistakes or say the wrong thing.

**Deepening people's leadership skills.** Marian talked about gaining new skills, including how to plan for and execute an Oak Ridge Periodic Tables event and recruit an intentional and diverse group of conversation participants. The organization also taught folks how to understand diversity and how to create a safe space that allows people to be pushed, but not triggered, which includes things like setting conversational boundaries, upholding community agreements, and making space for tension to arise.

## Learnings

Pastor Allred and focus group community participants shared four things that Oak Ridge Periodic Tables has learned about practicing pluralism in its work to date:

**1 Pluralism work often begins with self-reflection.** It requires people to be honest and vulnerable and look inward to acknowledge all parts of themselves—the good, the bad, and the parts that contradict themselves. Pastor Allred said, *“Until we see ourselves as people who contain multitudes of feelings, expressions, and ideas it’s hard to see the other.”* When people can’t engage in self-reflection, he added, they are more disposed to make judgments about others and reduce people to singular aspects of themselves. Naomi reflected on something similar: *“A big part of it for me is just learning to understand myself and my own trigger points, and hopefully learning how I can be careful with that moving forward.”*

**2 Allowing uncomfortable feelings is part of pluralism work.** These feelings can fuel the disruption that needs to happen within us and others that enables us to hear others who differ from us. Pastor Allred talked about embracing uncomfortable feelings in conversation as an important element in engaging in pluralistic conversations. Participants also talked about how conversations cannot go as deep if people don’t open up and face hard topics with bravery.

**3 Storytelling is the heart of pluralistic conversations.** Focus group participants talked about the importance of connecting people through stories and the power that stories have in connecting people’s hearts and minds. In reaction to the story told about advancing disability justice in Oak Ridge, Phyllis said, *“It has to be [stories] ... when we start telling stories ... the dinners take on a different kind of vibe.”*

**4 Pluralism requires effective and diverse conversation facilitators.** People who can hold tension, make space for conflict, and lead a group through messy conversations are better able to facilitate courageous conversations across differences. People who are naturally curious about life and human beings also tend to be effective facilitators. Pastor Allred said there is a need for facilitators to be diverse—from all races, ages, and political and economic backgrounds. Naomi explained that the work of Oak Ridge can only be *“driven by people willing to listen and learn and do it because they care,”* and Valerie added that *“we need more young people at some of these tables, and we [need to] have [them] early on.”*



**Want to learn more about Oak Ridge Periodic Tables?** Visit the website: [oakridgeperiodictables.com](https://oakridgeperiodictables.com)

# Appendix

## **INTERVIEWEE:**

- Pastor David Allred, Oak Ridge Periodic Tables lead

## **FOCUS GROUP PARTICIPANTS:**

- Phyllis Alexander, diversity, equity, and inclusion trainer and member of the Racial Bridging team
- Naomi Asher, former director of United Way Anderson County
- Valerie Roberson, Racial Bridging team facilitator
- John Spratling, director of Scarboro 85 Monument Project and member of the Racial Bridging team
- Marian Wildgruber, member of the Rotary Peace and Social Justice team and member of the Disability Advisory Board