The Lab Report Dallas

This Thanksgiving, a Break and Reflection

A quick story about a thousand people who came together on a rainy Tuesday night to help untangle some of the region's knottiest issues.

Matt Goodman
November 26, 2025

Dallas Area Interfaith wants to make this a better place. (Photo by Matt Goodman)

On a Tuesday evening in mid-November, dozens of cars slow-rolled, bumper-to-bumper, along Northwest Highway, queuing to turn onto Hillcrest Road. Temple Emanu-El was this year's host for Dallas Area Interfaith's Reimagine Dallas event, a sort of annual statement of purpose for the organization. The group, which

consists of about three dozen congregations of various faiths and denominations, has since 1984 organized around issues rooted in justice, making sure policymakers and other powerful people follow through on their promises.

They'll show up on behalf of tenants to advocate for better living conditions. They'll show up to protest ICE raids. They'll show up to get the city to make intersections near schools safer for kids. Theirs is a quiet power, intentionally spread geographically across North Texas, that harnesses passionate parishioners who are willing to pack into this synagogue on a rainy weeknight at such a volume that the sprawling campus ran out of parking spots.

That's something like a thousand people, probably more. The roll call alone lasted about 10 minutes. The impressive showing is a reminder of the work happening beneath the surface across our region, how people come together to help others. Over 90 minutes, Reimagine Dallas delivered a snapshot of the region's big-picture challenges: housing affordability, early childhood education, street safety (a good call!), and protecting the rights of immigrants.

The elected officials in attendance—council members Chad West, Gay Donnell Willis, and Kathy Stewart; county commissioners Andy Sommerman, Theresa Daniel, and Elba Garcia—were asked yes/no questions as to whether they would promise to work with the group to advance its priorities. For housing, that means finding ways to bring down prices and open new avenues for home ownership. For education, the group wants a ballot measure presented to voters that would slightly increase the county's property tax rate to create a fund for pre-K programs. For infrastructure, urge transportation engineers to make the streets, well, safer.

Everyone mostly played along, but the portion on early childhood education got a little spicy. Commissioner Daniel elicited some groans when, instead of a yes, she vowed she was "willing to explore ways" to improve access to pre-K but stopped short of advocating for the ballot measure. The elected officials weren't sneaking anything past this group.

Temple Emanu-El Senior Rabbi David Stern began the night with Genesis 28:10, the tale of Jacob's Ladder. Running for his life, Jacob eventually finds a place to sleep. In his dream, he comes across a ladder to Heaven featuring angels going up and down its rungs. Stern lingered on the word "down," a signal that the angels are among the

living, not just watching from above. “The work takes all of us,” he said, “The angels are here, the angels are us.”

The Lab Report is taking a breather this Thanksgiving, having published 20 (!) stories since our launch in July. We’ve invested heavily in local enterprise journalism, focusing on topics that affect how people live in North Texas. That approach has put us in the rooms where the sort of work Dallas Area Interfaith highlighted is happening.

We’ve introduced you to people like Anastasia Nixon, who helps unsheltered families, and Toni Johnson, whose volunteer work at Roosevelt High School in Oak Cliff is keeping kids fed. We’ve examined difficult, complicated issues like how the city is funding affordable housing projects and how the county is trying to stand up alternatives to jail. We’ve walked you through neighborhoods like Esperanza, where the county is finally providing residents with services that have long been lacking in its corner of North Dallas.

That Tuesday at Temple Emanu-El, I sat among people who had spent the year thinking about their role in making North Texas a better place for all families. Reimagine Dallas was their capstone, a distillation of 10 months of research, listening sessions, and grassroots organizing. It was a reminder that people are closely watching the decisions that are made at City Hall and the county government center—and that they will hold their leaders accountable all while possessing what Stern referred to as “the most stubborn hope.”

As that work continues, so will The Lab Report’s effort to tell those stories by examining what’s working, what isn’t, and why. We hope you have a great Thanksgiving, and we’ll be back with another example next Wednesday.

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