

Personal Reflections on Kujenga

Geoffrey Paton – college student, Kujenga leader

“Here at Kujenga 2015 has been really fun. It’s been a great experience to engage with the youth, to help them kind of not being ashamed of taking pride in their religion, you know what I’m saying? Being strong in the faith and we have done a lot of activities that have brought them closer in a bond and creating new friendships and networks and it’s been an overall great experience.”

Thomessia Moore-Lawson – former Kujenga participant and young adult youth ministry leader

“As leaders in the Catholic church, it is becoming increasingly more difficult to maintain the presence of our African-American youth once they reach adulthood. I often reflect on what kept me grounded in my faith and why I wanted the same for my children.

I am not a “cradle” Catholic. At the age of five I was baptized and joined St. Francis of Assisi Catholic Church. Our family did not know very many people however, I quickly made a friend for life. Eventually, I learned about a youth group which we called the Teen Club; I was twelve and begged the youth minister to let me join (because of my age I was what you would call a silent member).

Everyone talked about a retreat called Kujenga, which noted your status of adulthood in the church through the sacrament of Confirmation. I could not wait to go to Kujenga. Everyone spoke of how much fun they had. Parents transported their kids and sometimes their kid's friends. The retreat site was in an isolated area far in the woods. The closer we got the more nervous and excited I became. The youth came from diverse geographical areas and it appeared there were hundreds in number. Our parents dropped off a group of excited youth. I had no idea what was in store.

I remember the first youth minister giving us the rules of the weekend and explaining that Kujenga is an African-American leadership retreat based on the seven principles of Kwanzaa presented in conjunction with the teachings of the Catholic Church. We were divided into seven families which represented the seven principles of Kwanzaa. We were encouraged to use our voices to speak loudly and to meet as many people as possible. We were taken out of our comfort zone and asked to discuss the meanings of our family names. We also presented skits.

Each time we spoke the youth ministers insisted we held our heads high and spoke our names loud and clear. Kujenga was a magical once in a lifetime experience where we participated in: The Sacrament of Reconciliation, Mass (with drums), African head dress (which we learned to tie), African poetry and healthy conversation about the church and its positions throughout the years on race relations. We also learned about African-American Catholics that were influential in the church but were never spoken of such as Sister Thea Bowman, Robert E. Jones, Matthew W. Clair Sr. and Sister (Mother) Mathilda Beasley. We were a collective group of African-American youth, an elite group of proud Catholic African-Americans who sat down

and discussed how to defend our faith. We were armed with the knowledge of who we were, where we came from and to whom we belonged. The first Kujenga I attended has forever been etched into my memory.

I attended my last Kujenga and went off to college. While I was away the Office of Black Ministries closed, Kujenga ceased to exist, and many of our Catholic African-American schools closed. I graduated and returned home to the church I knew and loved. After mass one Sunday, the priest asked me what I was going to give back to the church? I must admit I was taken by surprise, I had just gotten home, and it was time to get busy in the church?

The youth ministers in the parish must have heard I was ripe for the picking and asked that I and a fellow Kujenga alum succeed them. I was hesitant to say the least; how do you tell two people who poured so much into you, no?

Flash forward almost twenty years later and I am still working with the youth in my parish. When I first began in the ministry, we got off to a rocky start and I was not sure if this is where God really wanted me to be. As time progressed, I learned a lot and fine-tuned my areas of service, but I felt there was something missing.

I got the bright idea to bring Kujenga back. I solicited my college roommate and Kujenga alum to help me with Kujenga. It was an epic failure. Times had changed, the thought process of the youth had changed, there were cell phones, internet and no respect for something I held so sacred. I still wanted to be cool and have fun and I learned that was a recipe for a complete disaster. I chalked Kujenga up to loss and vowed reigniting one of my favorite teen memories, would be just that, a memory.

Years went by, the Office of Black of Ministry was re-opened under the Very Rev. Father Vernon Huguley as Vicar and James Watts as Director. James reached out to me in 2008 and asked that I coordinate Kujenga 2009. My mind was made up and the answer was no! I went to say no and yes came flowing out with sweet southern charm. James was excited and I was confused, as he began to rattle off dates and prepare times, I was in utter disbelief of what had just happened. I accepted the fact that my plan was again laughable in the eyes of the Master and at that moment I was supposed to be planning Kujenga.

The youth ministers in the consortium parishes and myself worked as a team to make Kujenga relevant and relatable to our youth. The first years were slow; after the second year we began to grow and develop. We began mixing the older traditions of Kujenga with current subject matters that concerned our youth. We also began to be a mixture of black and brown (Hispanic Youth). We kept our format the same but, inclusivity was key. We had breakout sessions with only girls and only boys, where we all cried and laughed as we discussed issues pertaining to our youth. We prayed, had mass, reconciliation, art activities, nature walks, African-American Catholic Jeopardy, skits, zip-lining, canoeing, scavenger hunts games and most importantly limited cell phone service.

One thing did not change, the youth ministers constantly encouraged the youth to speak loudly and hold their heads high. This will be our tenth year celebrating our greatness as Kujenga and as I reflect on the years and the support that has been afforded to me, I proudly pass the baton to Kujenga alums that have gone on to graduate from college and thrive in their fields. Many of the youth have gone on to become doctors, educators, public servants and spiritually guided individuals that give of their time talent and treasure. My prayer is that parishes nationwide can celebrate in this three-day weekend retreat together to give our youth even more of a reason to celebrate being Catholic, African-American, young and gifted.”

The 7 Principles of Kwanzaa (Nguzo Saba)

UMOJA – Unity

To strive for and maintain unity in the family, community, nation, and race.

KUJICHAGULIA – Self-determination

To define ourselves, create for ourselves, and speak for ourselves.

UJIMA – Collective Work and Responsibility

To build and maintain our community together and make our brothers’ and sisters’ problems our problems and to solve them together.

UJAMAA – Cooperative Economics

To build and maintain our own stores, shops, and other businesses, and to profit from them together.

NIA – Purpose

To make as our collective vocation, the building and developing of our community in order to restore our people to their traditional greatness.

KUUMBA – Creativity

To do always as much as we can in the way we can, in order to leave our community more beautiful and beneficial than when we inherited it.

IMANI – Faith

To believe with all our heart in our parents, our teachers, our leaders, our people, and our God, and in the righteousness and victory of our struggle.