

Rallying around our youths

In this age of fiscal cutbacks, the hardest hit seems to be to city youth. How can any community risk a reduction of services and outreach to young people, so precious to us especially in the midst of societal challenges that manifest themselves daily? However, youth leaders in our Catholic parishes have invested themselves and their ministry to enhance the spiritual and cultural enrichment of the young at the same time as forging an increase in leadership development among them. Great things have happened!

Young people have brought other young people into the church. Our young have grown in faith, recognizing that more growth is yet to come. Youth ministers from our parishes with guidance from Vincentian Father Abel Agbulu have rallied around them and have brought them in, planning for a gathering in celebration of African American Catholic youths.

On April 17, Bishop Denis J. Madden will gather with our youth and their leaders. Festivities will begin at 11:30 am with brunch and interactive discussions on vocations and faith building. Mass will follow at 2 p.m. with Bishop Madden and clergy from participating parishes. It will also be an opportunity to recognize and celebrate the 25th anniversary of the Harambee Organization. The location is New All Saints Church on Liberty Heights Avenue. All are welcomed to rally around and pray for our youths.

Spiritual enrichment and Christian formation have always been an intentional aspect of the mission of the church. With this as a focus, children, youths and adults are inspired and strengthened. In an article by Dr. Robert Hill titled, "Dispelling Myths And Building On Strengths: Supporting African American Families," spiritual formation is discussed. Dr. Hill provides research, which indicates that a religious orientation, (i.e. affiliation to a particular church and church organization) strengthens individuals as well as the entire African American family. The Harambee organization knows that when youths are spiritually grounded, they will be successful and contribute not only to the church but also society. Harambee provides spiritual enrichment and Christian formation through various activities. Presently, Harambee is led by Howard W. Roberts and has enjoyed the faith and

genius of School Sister of Notre Dame de Namur Gwynette Proctor, its foundress.

The organization established a choir, led by youths and was composed of more than 50 African American youths. This was a forum for them to pray and sing together. Harambee hopes to re-establish the choir soon for it had long term effects on our young people. Youth revivals and retreats are held each year.

All of the above is done in a manner that factors in culture. Thus, cultural enrichment is a component of Harambee's outreach to and with African American youth. Every culture has a language and a perspective that gives insight onto the human condition. African and African American culture helps African American youth to "know who they are and whose they are." Exploring African roots begins with an awareness of the Divine and stories of a people who survived beyond slave ships, shackles and racism. Cultural enrichment of the Harambee Organization practices the seven principles of the Nguzo Saba so that our youths may gain spiritual and cultural strength to heal the scars of racism and combat the many negative societal challenges.

Enhancing leadership skills among African American youths is another goal. Research indicates and Dr. Janice Hale Benson confirms in her book "Black Children: Their Roots Cultural and Learning Styles," that African American youths who are mentored in predominantly black institutions (i.e. the black church, black colleges, etc.) excel in mainstream society and are stronger in leadership roles in business and community outreach as compared to African American youths who have not been mentored. Harambee seeks to facilitate opportunities for youths to be mentored and enhance leadership, organizational, communication and peer ministry skills that can be employed in the church, school and community.

The Harambee Organization receives its funding from the Archbishop's Annual Appeal.

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