



Hartford International
UNIVERSITY FOR RELIGION & PEACE

HOLIDAYS IN THE WORKPLACE SERIES RESOURCE SHEET

FOR MORE INFORMATION ABOUT RELIGIOUS DIVERSITY TRAINING AND CONSULTATION CONTACT

Katy O'Leary - Director, Executive and Professional Education
860-509-9528
koleary@hartfordinternational.edu

Vanessa Avery - Fellow, Executive and Professional Education
vavery@hartfordinternational.edu

AFRICAN AMERICAN AND BLACK HERITAGE: THE WHAT, WHO, AND WHY OF JUNETEENTH AND KWANZAA

GROUND RULES

- Listen with an open heart and trust
- Speak using I statements
- Notice any judgments that come up, recognize them as such, and let them go.

PRESENTERS

Dr. Frederick Jerome Streets is the former Carl and Dorothy Bennett Professor in Pastoral Counseling at the Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, New York City. He is the first African American and Baptist to have served as Chaplain of Yale University, which he did from 1992-2007. He is an Associate Professor at Yale Divinity School, a licensed clinical social worker, a member of the faculty Harvard Program in Refugee Trauma, and he is Senior Pastor of the Dixwell Congregational Church in New Haven, CT.

Dr. Vanessa Avery is also a Fellow at Hartford International University for Religion and Peace where she develops intercultural and interreligious DEI strategies and trainings for workplaces that are committed to leadership in religious and spiritual inclusion. She is also the Executive Director of Sharing Sacred Spaces, Inc., using architecture, space, hospitality, and dialogue, as vehicles to bring people together. Vanessa is Lecturer of Interfaith Engagement at Yale Divinity School and affiliate faculty in Comparative Religion and Sociology at California State University.

PROGRAM SUMMARY

JUNETEENTH IS NOW A LEGAL STATE HOLIDAY

- Juneteenth became a federal holiday last year on June 16, 2021, and is slated to become a state holiday in Connecticut starting in 2023.

- Governor Ned Lamont signed the Act into law on May 27, 2022.

According to the Labor and Employment Law Journal (<https://www.cbia.com/news/hr-safety/juneteenth-to-become-state-holiday-in-connecticut/>):

- Beginning next year in Connecticut, Juneteenth will be observed on June 19 or the nearest Friday or Monday if it falls on the weekend.
- As a state holiday, schools are required by state law either to close or to “hold a suitable nonsectarian educational program in observance of [the] holiday.”
- Banks and credit unions in the state will close.
- There is no general legal obligation for other employers in Connecticut to close or provide holiday pay; however, employers should consult their handbooks to determine whether they enumerate specific holidays for closure/premium pay or whether they refer to state holidays.
- In the latter case, Juneteenth would now be added to such a list.

Juneteenth and Kwanzaa are very different in nature, but they are both steeped in a long history of hundreds of years of black holiday making, often referred to as the black holiday tradition, or the black holiday calendar.

WHAT IS JUNETEENTH?

- Juneteenth marks the day— June 19th, 1865— when General Gordon Granger arrived in Galveston, Texas, to issue the order of the end of slavery. Gen Granger’s order also included “an absolute equality of personal rights and rights of property between former masters and slaves, and the connection heretofore existing between them becomes that between employer and hired labor.”
- African Americans have celebrated Juneteenth within their communities on June 19th dating back to 1866.
- Juneteenth was one of many “freedom days” that dotted the black holiday calendar. “Whites in the 19th century based many celebrations on religious or ethnic affiliation; blacks on freedom...” (Dr. Keith Mays).
- Identity formation, cultural identity, and cultural continuity have all been major forces in shaping black consciousness, as is reflected in the writings of black authors, and helped give rise to the holiday and celebration of Juneteenth.
- Juneteenth is a reflection of the ongoing fight against black racism and our nation's need and attempts to reconcile multiple cultural identities of its people in such a way that we can become more of a national community of peace and justice.

WHAT IS KWANZAA?

- Kwanzaa is celebrated from December 26th - January 1st and is an invented holiday to reconnect with cultural roots in Africa, and to restore and renew black identity. It is generally based on African harvest holidays.

- Kwanzaa is based on seven key principles: Unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity, and faith. Kwanzaa is also rich in symbols and ritual, like candle-lighting and (homemade) gift-giving.
- Kwanzaa and its inventor, Maulana Karenga, were born out of the Black Power movement of the 1950s and 60s. With Kwanzaa and other black "protest" holidays, Karenga found a new way of celebrating and reflecting upon black pride, identity, and culture through the calendar.
- The name Kwanzaa comes from the Swahili phrase matunda ya kwanza (meaning "first fruits") but is adapted into a new word intended to mean "first".
- Kwanzaa sounds authentically African; but Kwanzaa is really only inspirationally African. Karenga had to confess a few times for clarity: "Nowhere on the African continent is there a holiday named Kwanzaa." However, there were thousands of Kwanzaa-like holidays on the African continent- all tied to the local harvest celebrations.
- *Clarification: In the presentation it was stated that the Kwanzaa, as celebrated today, looks the same as the Kwanzaa at its inception. Please note the original Kwanzaa developed in 1966 only had 5 symbols. The 2 remaining symbols-- the crops and the unity cup-- were not added until 1977.

WHAT CAN THESE HOLIDAYS TEACH US ABOUT SUPPORTING AFRICAN-AMERICANS IN THE WORKPLACE?

- African and black Americans are not monolithic. Kwanzaa observance varies widely and depends heavily on family and community history. This can lead to its observance being a more individualistic and private observance.
- Oppressed communities in any situation, but particularly in the American context, have a "double consciousness" (W.E.B. Du Bois). They face the struggle of having to forge an identity that sustains and reflects them, while also being a part of the majority culture. Support holidays and celebrations that help actualize black identity, dignity, and culture.
- The Black Holiday Calendar can be thought of as a parallel to the ways in which religious traditions have their own calendars and festivals.
- Decisions on how to approach a holiday in the workspace/college setting should not be based on the number of people observing the holiday, but on what it means to those who are observing it.
- Do not assume that because someone is a member of a certain ethnicity or race that they observe any given holiday at all or in the same way as others.

SOURCES

Deep gratitude to the following two scholar-authors to whom I am indebted for much of this material.

Dr. Annette Gordon-Reed, who wrote *On Juneteenth*. Dr. Gordon-Reed is an American historian and law professor. She is currently the Carl M. Loeb University Professor at Harvard University and a historian in Harvard's faculty of Arts & Sciences.

Dr. Keith Mays, who wrote *Black Power and the Making of the African-American Holiday Tradition*. Dr. Keith Mays is professor in the department of African-American and African studies at the University of Minnesota.