African-Americans celebrate culture

Seven-day Kwanzaa observance begins in Lafayette today.

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Staff Writer

LAFAYETTE — While most of the city reels in the aftermath of Christmas spending and celebration, the African-American community will be embarking upon a spiritual quest.

Kwanzaa, a seven-day recognition of African-American culture and unity, begins today. For the fifth consecutive year in Lafayette, families in the area will celebrate the holiday with nightly activities coordinated by the Imani Temple No. 49.

The temple, which is a member of the nationwide African-American Catholic Congregation, has approximately 350 members.

“Historically, black people have been ashamed of their past,” Bishop Carlos Harvin of the Imani Temple said. “Hopefully Kwanzaa will educate others to the beauty of our culture. This is not meant to be a battle of cultures.”

Vanessa Williams-Harvin and Bishop Carlos Harvin plan Kwanzaa during a recent meeting at the Imani Temple.

The Kwanzaa celebration, which began in 1966, involves the lighting of a different candle on each night of the holiday. The candles symbolize such African-American ideals as unity, self-determination, collective work and responsibility, cooperative economics, purpose, creativity and faith.

Also during each night of the celebration, family members present gifts to one another in an East African tradition called Zawadi.

“There are usually something that you create on your own,” Vanessa Williams-Harvin, chairperson of this year’s Kwanzaa celebration at the Imani Temple, said.

The Imani Temple’s activities commemorating Kwanzaa will culminate on Jan. 1 with a Mass at 3 p.m. and a festival following at the Northside High School girls’ gym. The festival will feature a traditional African dance and drum troupe as well as poetry readings.

On each night leading up to the citywide festival on Jan. 1, a different family will host a candle-lighting ceremony.

“It’s all about family,” Debra Randle, who will be hosting today’s ceremony at her home, said.

“There’s no materialism involved with Kwanzaa. It’s from the heart.”

This year the Imani Temple will hold a special ceremony at 2 p.m. Jan. 1 for children in the area. Harvin said the ceremony will be used to teach children about their African-American roots and to reinforce the spiritual reasons behind Christmas and Kwanzaa.

Harvin said although Kwanzaa is a non-denominational holiday separate from Christmas — the two do not replace one another — more families in the area are combining them in order to create a more meaningful experience.

“Kwanzaa gets us back to the roots of Christmas,” Harvin said. “People see Kwanzaa as a breath of fresh air.”