

## **DAILY NEWS METRO**

### **Ministry at another level**

**Bronx pastor hopes President's race panel leads to real healing**

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**By CHRISENA COLEMAN**

The Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook's new journey across America's racial divide began with a trip aboard Air Force One.

"It was awesome," said Cook, of her flight. "As I walked on to the plane, there was the President and members of his cabinet. It finally hit me, I was at a new level."

For Cook, the senior minister of the Bronx Christian Fellowship in Melrose, the new level was a seat on President Clinton's seven-member advisory panel on race relations.

"Flying on Air Force One brought tears to my eyes," said Cook 40. "I thought about my mother, my grandmother, the women in my family, and African-American women in general. I excused myself, went into the bathroom and screamed."

Once the initial shock wore off, Cook said she took a deep breath and went back out into the cabin, which she described as a "big cozy living room in the sky," and resumed her place at the race-relations table.

The President recently appointed the commission and announced his intention to stimulate an honest, national dialogue on the sensitive issue of race in America.

Cook has been called upon to assist the president before. From 1993 to 1994 she was a White House fellow, where she analyzed domestic policy and assisted with some speech writing. She also was a consultant to the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

As a long-time resident of the Bronx, which is now predominantly African-American and Latino, Cook said she has experienced the joys of diversity and the horrors of racism.

When Cook's parents moved to their north Bronx neighborhood more than 30 years ago, they integrated the predominantly Italian and Jewish Gun Hill Road area.

Cook still recalls the day she boarded a school bus and invited a Jewish classmate to sit next to her. The girl told Cook that her mother said she could not sit next to a black person.

"The seeds of racism are planted at an early age," said Cook, the mother of two boys. "Every African-American person is faced with racism at some point in life...you recognize there is a difference."

So when the President's advisory panel convenes its first meeting later this month, Cook will bring her personal experiences to the table as well as information that has been mailed, phoned, faxed and wired to her since her appointment last month.

"Race relations is the most critical issue facing America," said Cook. "It has been swept under the rug much too long. Now, it's time to get America talking about it and respecting diversity."

Cook said she knows it will take a lot of hard work to change the mind-set of some Americans—she already has received racist notes and threats since her appointment.

"This country was founded on a principle that we (blacks) were not people and that has carried over," she said.

White House Deputy Communications Director Ann Lewis said Cook and the other commission members were chosen after an intensive search process. "There were literally hundreds of calls made to people across the country," Lewis said. "The outreach was tremendous."

Cook is the panel's only New Yorker. It consists of three whites, two African-Americans, one Hispanic and one Korean-American. It will hold

“town hall” style meetings around the country and gather information about Americans’ attitudes on race.

“We all represent the diversity of America,” said Cook. “I feel that God has placed me in a position to be a voice for those who are not at the table ...a voice of reality.”

Since she graduated from Emerson College in Boston, Cook has been appointed to several prestigious positions. In 1990, former Mayor David Dinkins appointed her the first female chaplain of the New York City Police Department.

“She will definitely be an asset to the commission,” Dinkins said. “She is a fine, bright woman, wonderful mother, strong and smart. And she is thoroughly committed to people of every race, religion, and color. She is a true Christian.”

Cook’s success is no surprise to her mother, Dorothy Johnson. She said her daughter has always been a leader.

“She excelled at the Riverdale (Country) School and graduated (cum laude) from college a year early,” said Dorothy Johnson, who was raised in North Carolina during segregation. “My mother raised me to speak up and express myself and I raised my kids the same way...never take the back seat.”

Despite her credentials, Cook said she has experienced racism on all levels. “I deal with racism as congregants share their grief, as an African-American woman, and I am sure I will deal with it, as the mother of two boys who will one day become black men.”

Cook says she is not sure what she and husband, Ronald, will tell their sons, Samuel, 4, and Christopher, 2, about racism, but she is more than positive it will come up. She said Samuel is already aware that his skin is brown and his hair is of a different texture than that of white children.

“We haven’t had any talks about race yet, I don’t want to frighten them,” said Cook. “But my husband and I do affirm and celebrate our African-American culture every chance we get. We want our sons to be proud of who they are and respect those who are different.”