

ESSENCE

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THE REVEREND SUZAN JOHNSON COOK: sister minister

When the Reverend Suzan Johnson Cook started preaching 11 years ago at Mariner's Temple, the oldest Baptist church in Manhattan, she never imagined that the congregation would ask her to lead it. But given her style, energy and imagination, Cook became the first African-American woman elected senior pastor of an American Baptist church. Today her congregation, which once numbered a mere 60 members in 1983, is now more than 1,000 strong.

In 1990 Mayor David Dinkins appointed her the first female chaplain of the New York City Police Department. However Rev. Cook finally received national recognition last year when President Clinton appointed her the first female minister to receive a White House Fellowship. Explains Justin Leites, a spokesman for the 20-year-old program, "The fellowship provides outstanding Americans with firsthand experience in the process of governing the nation."

Raised in a religious household in The Bronx, Rev. Cook resides in Brooklyn with her husband, Ronald, and her son, Samuel. She decided on a career in the ministry during her college years. "I studied communications at Emerson College, but I greatly admired Katie Cannon, a minister who taught at Temple University," she remembers. "It wasn't until I went to Ghana as an exchange student that I started thinking seriously about the ministry. I discussed my change of heart with my family. They simply asked me if I had decided to give up television. I told them, 'No, I won't forsake the medium, but I have found a more powerful message.'"

Her family supported her decision to pursue a doctorate at United Theological Seminary. "Breaching the male preserve of Baptist pastorship is not easy. I've had support from the Reverend Wyatt Tee Walker in Harlem. But other ministers rendered their support, shall we say, surreptitiously."

Determined to encourage other sisters to pursue the pulpit fulltime, Cook directed Black Women in the Ministry, a program in her church sponsored by the New York City Mission Society. She is also the author of two books on women and religion, entitled *Wise Women Bearing Gifts: Joys and Struggles of Their Faith* (Judson Press, \$10) and *Preaching in Two Voices: Sermons on the Women in Jesus' Life* (Judson Press, \$10), and is currently exploring television opportunities to spread the Word.

“I had hoped that by now there would be more female pastors in the Baptist church,” she admits. “There are still fewer than 1 percent of us. But I have great faith that women will assume their rightful place within the ministry real soon.”

-PRIMUS MASON DAVEY