

HERITAGE

Words from the past, thoughts for the future

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Black History Month 2001

Chaplain – New York City Police Dept.

Dr. Rev. Suzan D. Johnson Cook

Few women hold the post of chaplain of police; the Rev. Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook is chaplain for New York City's finest. Rarely does a minister attract presidential attention, but in 1997 Dr. Cook was appointed by Bill Clinton to the President's Initiative on Races. The Baptist Church historically supported male ministers; Dr. Cook is the first African American woman in the 200-year history of the Baptist Church to pastor a congregation.

"Being a 'first' is certainly exciting, it means you're breaking new ground," says Dr. Cook. "But for me it's also important to be preparing others and opening doors, so there can be a second, third, a fourth."

Not that it's been easy. "With any trailblazing experience, things are tough," she adds. "People are not always comfortable with you. Some welcome you with open arms, while others wonder, 'How did she get here? Is there an agenda?' My only motive has been to be able to serve as many people as possible."

Despite these honors, Dr. Cook sees herself as "a public servant at heart. I come from parents who are civil servants, who shared our home with many people who were having hardships. Ultimately, it's my congregation and the 40,000 people in the New York City Police Department who need someone to counsel them and to embrace them during difficult times that I am there for."

Dr. Cook credits her parents with setting high standards, providing an excellent education and a happy childhood, and giving her "wings" to fly. "My family is the foundation of my ministry and part of the reason for my success today," she says.

Raised in Harlem and the Bronx, Dr. Cook remembers fondly the strong community spirit in the neighborhood. She carried this over to her first post, as pastor of the oldest American Baptist church in the country. The 200-year-old church was in Chinatown and the congregation and neighborhood included African Americans, Latinos, Asians and Caucasians.

In Chinatown she helped found the Multi-Ethnic Center for Children and Families as “dropout prevention” for school kids, and to bring together groups that experienced racial tensions.

“As I do ministry, as a pastor, as I lead the New York Coalition of 100 Black Women (Dr. Cook is the president), I find myself trying to create a sense of community and an extended family,” she notes.

Dr. Cook is currently the pastor of Bronx Christian Fellowship Church, and the author of *Too Blessed to Be Stressed: Words of Wisdom for Women on the Move*.

“Because my family set no boundaries on dreams, because there were no set gender roles, I feel I can do anything I want to,” she concludes. How fortunate for her congregation, for the police department and for our country that her idea of “anything” means putting others first.