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# NEW YORK WOMAN

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## **She's got the power**

**The Reverend Suzan Johnson Cook works her magic to bring together African-Americans**

By LOUISA KAMPS

At a recent Sunday service at Mariners' Temple Baptist Church in Chatham Square, The Reverend Doctor Suzan Johnson Cook delivered a homily on Jesus and the invalid at Bethesda's pool.

But instead of telling the story straight—reading from the Bible behind her pulpit—the dynamic 39-year-old minister of 200-year-old-church in lower Manhattan used some of her trademark stagecraft to enliven the tale.

An assistant delivered a low, cushioned lawn chair to the altar, and Johnson Cook sat down to do an impersonation of the invalid who discovers he's able to rise, pick up his mat, and walk into the healing pool once Jesus tells him he can.

There were some minor technical difficulties—the cushion wouldn't separate from the chair—but the point of her story was perfectly clear. You can if you think you can. And, by the time she was back on her feet, many of her congregants were calling out emphatic "Amens!" and "Mmm-hmms's!" from the pews.

In 1983, when Johnson Cook took up her post at Mariners', she became the first African-American woman elected to a senior pastorate in the American Baptist Church.

In the 13 years since, the well-known and loved minister has tried to deliver impassioned but level-headed sermons that suit the particular needs of the surrounding urban community.

Preaching "to economic groups, that tend to have low-esteem issues," she explains while relaxing in her office after the service. "I try to stir up the

gifts that are in them. I like to do creative non-traditional things. Some things have worked, and others have not. But I have felt empowered and have empowered other people.”

In addition to her Sunday services, she also holds a popular noon service on Wednesdays, dubbed the “lunch hour of power,” in which she tries to inspire workers from nearby Chinatown and Wall Street to bear up under the strains of the workweek.

Despite the general growth and strength of her ministry, Johnson Cook says that in the past few years she’s found that the black women who make up the majority of her congregation have certain needs that her regular co-ed sermons don’t address.

Not being one who shies from a task, she decided to compile and edit “Sister to Sister: Devotions by and for African-American Women,” a book published by Judson Press last fall, in which 68 black women of different ages share stories of their joys and struggles with, among other things, marriage, career, grief, racism, parenting and illness.

To find contributors, Johnson Cook says she thought of the women who had “touched and inspired” her own life. “And then basically I went through old address books,” she adds, laughing. One such person is her fifth grade teacher, who wrote a moving account of her difficulties dealing with the death of her son for the collection.

Some stories in “Sister to Sister” have a distinctly spiritual tone, closely quoting scripture, and others are written in a more personal, anecdotal style. But, as Johnson Cook intended, the final product is a remarkably varied collection of real-life tales.

“There’s always been the tradition of African-American oral storytelling, and my hope is that women can see themselves in the other women’s stories and find strength from that,” she says. “Maybe it can show someone that it’s OK to seek a new job if stress is too high, that one of the joys of living in this time is that we don’t have to have one career.”

Right now, Johnson Cook feels, the moment is particularly right for black women to stop and take stock of their lives.

“Since the ‘60s, women have been meeting for a cause. But I think we’re at a crossroads in history. Yes, some women have gotten into the corporate boardrooms. But sometimes we move so fast that we have to ask ourselves, ‘Do I believe my own rhetoric?’ ”

This book is the minister’s call for a “time-out.” And it seems “Sister to Sister’s” empowering messages have hit the mark: After just a few months, the book is already in its second printing.

In addition to her roles as an editor, writer, and preacher at Mariners’, Johnson Cook is also Police Department Chaplain, a consultant to the Housing and Urban Development Committee in Washington, D.C., and occasionally a teacher. (She recently taught at the Harvard Divinity School.)

The advantage, or “blessing,” as she calls it, that’s enabled her to do so much—without feeling intimidated as an often ground-breaking black woman—she says, comes from having grown up around confident, successful people.

“The ethic around me was always, ‘It may be against all odds, but if the moment’s right, you can do it—no one can shake you.’ If the model you’ve grown up with is a good one, you tend not to stray too far.”