

**Public Employee Press**  
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# Holy medicine for weary souls

Every Wednesday at lunchtime, at least 300 city employees pack a small church in downtown Manhattan to hear the words of a minister who, they say, gives them the strength to “make it through another day.”

Because of her inspiring sermons, they return from that tranquil oasis ready to face the stress of their jobs and the trials of their everyday lives.

## **She lifts their spirits**

Police Administrative Aide Angela Lee, who has attended the services every week for seven years, says, “When we leave, our spirits are lifted, because her message always hits home and picks you up when you are feeling down.”

The minister who tends the spiritual life of these weary workers is the Rev. Dr. Suzan D. Johnson Cook, senior pastor of The Mariners’ Temple Baptist Church. Located at 3 Henry St., it’s the oldest Baptist church in Manhattan.

A member of DC 37’s local 299, Johnson Cook is the first female chaplain employed by the New York City Police Department. As a chaplain on 24-hour call, she counsels those who seek help with personal, family and work problems.

When an officer is injured or killed in the line of duty, she is called upon to help their families through their grieving.

She helps people get through the hard times by accenting the positive, especially at her “Hour of Power” lunchtime service.

“We cannot permit the contradictions that are found in our workplace to distract us,” she preached during a recent session. “We are too blessed to be stressed.”

Adding to the positive energy exuded by the congregation is a stirring choir. Many of the singers work in city offices and make time to use their talents, in the words of Vermell Jackson, “to lift their voices to God in joyful thanksgiving for His love.”

Last year, Johnson Cook’s congregation had to bid her a temporary farewell and Godspeed when she accepted a one-year executive fellowship at the White House. She served on the Domestic Policy Council, focusing on the issues of violence, homelessness and community empowerment.

Every two weeks, Johnson Cook gave a personal report on her work to President Bill Clinton.

She learned much during that experience that she applies now in her ministry. “Leaders must be able to operate, no matter what party is in power, to gain the best services for their constituency and to improve the quality of life of the people they are accountable to,” she said.

Her experience also leads her to urge her congregation to pray for those in authority. “Whether it’s the Police Department or the White House, it is very difficult for leaders to deal with so many interest groups and become the target of those they are unable to satisfy.”

A recurring theme in her homilies since she has returned home is the recognition that no matter how much importance many people attach to the seat of power in government, “the real power is with your family and friends who love and appreciate you, no matter what title you hold or where you carry out God’s mission.”

It is that kind of uplifting message that means so much to the workers who attend her weekly services.

For NYPD civilians like Jackson, Tina Andrews, and Edward Barr, Johnson Cook’s ministry fills a void that women and minority employees had urged the department to fill for years.

“She is always very understanding of the pressures of our work, which involves dealing with the public,” said Barr, who has been going to the church for 10 years and is an ordained deacon who assists at the Wednesday services.

**An hour of power**

Jackson, a member of the choir that sings every other week, said; “Dr. Johnson Cook’s ‘Hour of Power’ is just that: She gives us the power to help understand ourselves and others.”

Barr and Jackson, both activists in Local 1549, say the minister’s teachings also help them in their union work. “Sometimes members get frustrated with problems, and when they bring them to you they are angry and upset,” said Jackson. “Dr. Johnson Cook’s teachings help me to better understand how to deal with all kinds of people. If I miss a Wednesday service, I feel the loss all week long.”

Crystal Jordan, a Local 957 member who works at Housing Authority headquarters on Broadway, said she heard about the Wednesday program for workers from a friend. “I go in good weather or bad. It gives you the extra boost you need to get through till next week.”

Johnson Cook practices what she preaches about setting priorities: God first, then family, then vocation and profession.

“Having my son wake up and say ‘Mommy, hi,’ was one of the best thrills of my life while I was working in Washington,” she said. “And having my husband Ronald phone me at the White House on a rough day to say, ‘I love you and am praying and rooting for you,’ and having my family congregation visit me—those were the real thrills of that experience. I returned ready to help empower those who desire it.”

She learned about empowerment at the knees of her parents, both active in their churches—her mother at Rendall Memorial Church and her father at Union Baptist Church in Harlem.

“When I was growing up in the early ‘50s, the church was central to our culture and upbringing,” she recalled. “It was at the heart of the civil rights movement, and we often met preachers who became our role models—people like the Rev. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. and Adam Clayton

Powell. Church for us was a place of joy where we were affirmed as individuals.”

While attending Boston’s Emerson College where she received her Bachelor of Science degree at 19, Johnson Cook majored in television. She says she thought about becoming an actress, but her roots kept bringing her back to the church.

She recalls that while spending summers with her maternal grandparents in Concord, N.C., she met the first woman minister in the Presbyterian Church, Dr. Katie G. Cannon, who had a strong influence on her, as did Dr. John Bryant of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

“They worked at bringing college students into the church and making it alive by affirming our history. I decided that I wanted to be part of that movement.”

She went on to receive her master’s degree in 1978 from Columbia University’s Teachers College, and her Master of Divinity degree in 1983 from Union Theological Seminary. She served a student ministry at her father’s church, and at the age of 26 was elected minister of the Mariners’ Baptist Church.

#### **Chaplain’s work is a blessing**

Two years later, then Police Commissioner Benjamin Ward asked her to consider becoming a chaplain for the NYPD. But because she had been selected for a fellowship as a professor in urban studies and homiletics at the Divinity School of Harvard University, she had to decline.

When she returned to New York City in September 1990, she learned that the chaplain position had not been filled. She had already completed the necessary screening, and Commissioner Lee Brown asked if she would consider taking the job. The offer was “a wonderful blessing,” said Johnson Cook, and she felt proud to be appointed to the position by Mayor David Dinkins.

Local 299 President Gary Tenenbaum said: The real blessing is Dr. Johnson Cook. Our chaplains have a special calling and play an important role in the

spiritual well being of the people they serve. She touches everyone who knows her in a very special way.”

Johnson Cook, her husband Ronald, and their “bubbling” two-year-old son Samuel David have much to be thankful for, she says. Just around Mother’s Day this year, the family will be blessed again with the birth of a second child.

--Geri Ruth

### **A personal report for president**

The opportunity to serve in a White House executive fellowship was well worth the sacrifice she and her family had to make, according to the Rev. Dr. Suzan D. Johnson Cook.

While she lived and worked in Washington, D.C., with her one-year-old son for a year, her husband stayed in New York. “There was plenty of commuting back and forth on weekends and many phone calls, but it was an honor to be chosen and a very important learning experience,” said Johnson Cook.

She was one of 17 young leaders selected by President Clinton for a fellowship, and every two weeks she gave him a personal report on her work. She describes the president as “a genuinely warm human being who cares about people.” She said one time as she reported to him the Secret Service tried to rush him to another engagement. “He nicely told them he was in the middle of a conversation and that he would be there. I really appreciated that.”

From her second day on the job, when she represented the president in New York at a Baptist Ministers’ Conference and a Black Leadership Commission meeting on AIDS, she was busy organizing meetings and conferences.

During the year she also had the opportunity to greet Commissioner William Bratton when he was at the White House working on the crime bill.

She has many memories of her experience, but 17 stand out. They were the snowstorms that hit D.C. She then had to carry her son 13 blocks to work.

“But they have wonderful day care programs for government workers, and I was lucky to be near Samuel,” she said.