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## THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO SUJAY

**After reviving Chinatown's only black church, Suzan Johnson Cook has brought her popular ministry of spirituality and achievement home to the Bronx middle class. By Samuel G. Freedman**

The reverend Suzan Johnson Cook felt awed enough just being in the Cabinet Room. In eight months as a white House fellow, eight months of nearly daily meetings in the West Wing, only once before had she been summoned to a meeting of President Clinton's top appointees. They were settling into square-back armchairs at a 22-foot mahogany table, amid busts of Washington and Franklin, oils of Jefferson and Lincoln, the brass-and-walnut clock from Harry S. Truman's presidential yacht. Just then Henry Cisneros, the secretary of Housing and Urban Development, burst into the room, cast his gaze at her—child of the Bronx, the tomboy still known by the nickname Sujay, the homegirl whose favorite exclamation is “*Dag!*”—and declared, “You're the perfect one.” Cisneros had been mulling a plan to enlist religious congregations in the battles against gangs and weapons in HUD's housing projects. Johnson Cook, he believed, was the ideal choice to be the assistant secretary who would link the federal government to the pulpits. She had built up her own Manhattan church, the Mariners' Temple, from barely a dozen congregants to a thousand. She knew how to reach the black middle class. She was already in Washington, with four months left on her term as a fellow. She was, recalls Cisneros, now president and COO of the Spanish-language television network Univision, “dramatic, magnetic, intelligent.” For Johnson Cook, the offer couldn't have been better timed. She had instantly taken to life in Washington, staying in the same high-rise as Attorney General Janet Reno, bumping into her neighbor Congressman Joseph Kennedy by the elevator bank, representing the president before the National Baptist Convention, the very same black church body that had never invited her to its annual meeting as a pastor. “It was the joint,” she would say later of that day in 1994 in Washington, her voice hushed and wistful. “I had the juice all around me.”

But her mind turned to the Book of Matthew, to the verses about Jesus in the wilderness being offered by Satan *all the kingdoms of the world, and the glory of the... thou wilt fall down and worship me*. Henry Cisneros hardly qualified as Satan, but Johnson Cook was indeed being tempted by the things of this world. And like her Savior, she rejected them. When the fellowship ended, she returned to her church. Part of it had to do with her sense of obligation to Mariners' Temple. But much of it had to do with neither. “There's

no price tag you can put on the mission,” she explains. “You start on it, and you keep going until you’re released by God.”

“WHAT DAY IS THIS?” Johnson Cook demands of the twenty men and women arrayed before her in a circle of folding chairs.

“This is the day the Lord had made,” they answer in unison.

It is, to be precise, 6:55 A.M. on Sunday, A.M. on Sunday, April 2, more than an hour before she will begin the first of two worship services at her newest church, the Bronx Christian fellowship, which the congregation bought two months ago for \$600,000. A fieldstone building with slate roof and oak doors on wrought-iron hinges, it looks better suited to an English hamlet of thatch-roof cottages than to an urban village of brick duplexes and five-story apartments pressed between the Bronx River Parkway and the No. 2 El’s trestle.

Here in the basement, Johnson Cook has gathered her leadership team, the lay volunteers who staff the church’s programs for dance and music and youth, who teach in its Sunday school and manage its finances, who this past week swept out the stucco sanctuary and this linoleum-tiled social hall. She stands before them in a lime-green sweater suit, her hair set in a pert pageboy, her ankle ringed by a delicate gold chain, her five-foot-ten frame otherwise suitable for an NBA power forward.

She strides to a wall adorned with a canvas banner declaring A NEW BEGINNING IN THE BRONX and an oak-tag outline of the morning’s lesson, prominently featuring the words TARGET: BLACK PROFS AND FAMILIES. Some of those professionals are sitting on the chairs in front of her—chemist James T. Jones Jr., Housing Authority site manager Venice Kendall, court officer Yvette Knighton Stevenson. They are the hidden backbone of the black community, the likes of whom Johnson Cook has brought into the fold over nearly twenty years of ministry. Now she checks their answers to a homework question: “What is your Christian job description?” After they have finished speaking of being prayerful and loyal, faithful and reliable, Johnson Cook fills in the blank herself.

“When you think you’ve arrived, you’re arrogant,” she says, punching the air with a felt-tip marker for emphasis. “Everyone can grow. Everyone can get to the next level. You’ve got to get to the level where *He* needs you. Not your boss. Not the Stock Exchange. When I was at the White House, I thought I was supposed to be one of them Washington yuppies. But the Lord said, ‘You are my pastor.’ ”

Six years after leaving Washington, Suzan Johnson Cook at 43 has achieved a singular national prominence in a career composed of one improbable choice after another: entering a ministry deeply resistant to women as pastors; spurning the status of the White House and, earlier, of a Harvard deanship, to stay with a black church in the unlikely

setting of Chinatown; and then, most stunning of all by clerical standards, leaving that booming congregation to start all over again with a dozen faithful and a rented chapel in the Bronx Christian Fellowship. The dedication of the 300-family church this month marks the latest accomplishment of a minister who may just be the most important woman in that legendary institution, the black church.

Johnson Cook has led neither the first nor the largest church headed by a black woman; she has not championed a feminist theology and in certain ways has resisted it. Yet her combination of political contacts, pulpit eloquence, experience as a TV producer, and acceptance by the church's old-boy network makes her a formidable figure. She has been a police chaplain, a member of President Clinton's initiative on race, and the first woman officer in the Hampton University Ministers' Conference, the major annual meeting of black church leaders. She's written or edited five books, ranging from motivational essays to a serious theological consideration of the New Testament's women. Her burden, as much as her blessing, is the surfeit of talents competing for her attention.

"I have to determine which voice I'll listen to," Johnson Cook acknowledges. "I wrestle with that all the time. But it's got to be God's voice for me. It can't be pastoring *or*. It's got to be pastoring *and*. I decided to leave Washington because staying there would've isolated me. What makes me me is being able to touch my people."

When the 8 A.M. worship service begins, Johnson Cook, now clad in a white robe with kente-cloth piping and holding the pulpit microphone, asks the 200 worshippers before her the same question she'd posed earlier to her church cabinet. And they, too, know just what to answer. They carry Bibles with favorite verses highlighted in yellow marker, Bibles so well-used they are held together with packing tape. Fully at ease, and athlete's swagger in her step, she runs the service by turns as concert, revival, town meeting, and stand-up comedy routine, an appropriate combination for a minister whose influences run from the Rev. Floyd Flake to the talk-show host Rosie O'Donnell. She leads a rousing version of "I Love You in the Love of the Lord" with the voice that once earned her a spot in the Apollo Theater's Amateur Night.

And when she lays into her sermon—tilting her head, clasping a microphone in one hand and kneading the air with the other—the service grows mesmerizingly personal as she considers the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, the Lord's Prayer. Johnson Cook makes it speak to a middle-class black congregation that knows its own kinds of struggles and yet feels a sort of survivor's guilt in taking pleasure from success. Just back from a family vacation at Disney World, she wants to reassure them that a little bit of the "health-and-wealth gospel" can coexist with the prophetic vision of social justice.

"Got to get the kids up," she preaches, morphing effortlessly into one of the middle-class moms sitting in front of her, her voice now clipped and impatient. "Get 'em fed and dressed' and off to school. Got *stuff* to deal with at work. Got to pick up the kids from

school. Got to have *energy* for the husband. So I'm pooped." She pauses, letting the image penetrate, letting her listeners see themselves in her words. Then her voice softens from rasp to fleece. "The Lord is a soul-restorer. The Lord speaks to us by the still waters. Do you know recreation is restoration? Do you know 48 hours ago I was in Typhoon Lagoon in a raft?" She lets the laughter subside, then adds, "I'm *glad* to know the soul-restorer."

"My whole theological understanding of Jesus is that His ministry was holistic," she explains later, "that it was about mind, body, *and* spirit. Many times, faith traditions have focused just on the spirit. But what happens after Sunday is that people have to face the realities—their bodies, their minds. So yes, my ministry does concentrate on black health and wealth. We can't just talk about what we're going to have as a people. We must achieve it. So wherever God can find a place for me and my resources, I'm there—whether it's the White House or a local congregation. I've been humbled by the opportunities God has given me, but I've also been prepared."

After the sermon, with one worship service done and another soon to begin, Johnson Cook sees a favorite member in the receiving line and asks, "What you havin' for dinner?"

"Turkey wings," the woman replies with a warmth implying an invitation.

"That's *good*," Reverend Johnson Cook says, at ease as any man with one of the perks of the pastoring life. "I had ribs yesterday."

Sunday meant not merely church but churches during Johnson Cook's childhood. She and her older brother Charles started with Bible school and a worship service in the Eastchester Presbyterian Church near their home in the Bronx. Then they took the No. 5 train to Harlem for the 11 A.M. service at Rendell Presbyterian, where their mother belonged. Finally, they walked the ten blocks to 145<sup>th</sup> Street for worship at their father's church, Union Baptist.

The itinerary reflected the centrality of Christianity to Sujay's life, along with the influence of two parents who were in disparate ways both self-made. Wilbert T. Johnson had left Virginia in the early thirties at age 15 to support his orphaned nephews, ultimately finding his way to Harlem and a job as one of New York's first black trolley-car operators. By the time Sujay was growing up, he had opened a security-guard company in the family's basement, serving clients from salsa ballrooms to Catholic church bazaars. Dorothy Cuthbertson, fourteen years Wilbert's junior, earned two master's degrees when it was rare enough for a black woman to attend college, and embarked on a 22-year career teaching at P.S. 194 in Harlem.

The family ethos, Johnson Cook recalls, centered on success: “You’ve got to achieve. Your homework has got to be impeccable. And you’re not going to break a verb at the dinner table. No ‘ain’t.’ ” Both Johnson children skipped grades in school. As teenagers, both worked in the family business, he in payroll, she keeping the ledgers. Charles got into Dartmouth just as Sujay was beginning junior high at the elite Riverdale Country Day School.

Such upward mobility had its price. The Johnson family integrated its neighborhood off Gun Hill Road in 1959, and typically, there were snubs from schoolmates and the condescension of teachers who deemed Sujay incapable of handling a class trip to Spain and urged her to find a job after high school rather than tax her talents with a college education.

“I was strengthened by the struggle,” she recalls of that time. “It tempered me. Know racism when you see it, identify it clearly, but be able to handle it when it comes. And that’s important. A leader can’t always respond by emotion. My payback came by achieving.” She became fluent in Spanish, ultimately studying in Valencia for a semester. At 16 she entered Fisk University, a historically black college in Nashville, and later transferred to Emerson in Boston, where she graduated cum laude in 1976 with a degree in speech. She earned a master’s in educational technology from Teachers College at Columbia, and by age 21 had cut her teeth in politics, helping her brother win election to the State Assembly, and begun her own career as a television producer on stations in Boston, Washington, and Miami.

But one day in the early eighties, she telephoned her family’s pastor at Union Baptist, the Reverend Ollie B. Wells Sr. She had to meet with him on her next trip north from Miami. Night after night, she told him, she could hear God’s call, like Samuel in the Bible being awakened three times by the Almighty’s summons to be a prophet. “It’s this insatiable desire to serve God,” she remembers now, “the feeling of being chosen that you can’t escape. It’s nonstop.”

“She was frightened,” Wells recalls. “It was an area where women weren’t accepted, and she just didn’t know if she could put everything on the line. I told her to go back to Miami and pray on it. And if your faith is real, you’ve gotta do what Peter did. Which is step out onto the water.”

Sujay had often spent summers during childhood with her aunt Martha Porcher, who worked as an assistant to the president of Barber-Scotia College in Concord, North Carolina. The summer Johnson Cook was 13, there was another houseguest, a Barber-Scotia student named Katie Cannon, who had decided to pursue the ministry. Sujay peppered her with questions. *What’s a call like? How do you get ordained?* And it occurred to her that in all those Sundays of churchgoing, she had rarely seen a black woman as a minister.

By the time Johnson Cook confessed her call to Ollie Wells, Katie Cannon already had become the first black woman to earn a doctorate from Union Theological Seminary and ordination in the Presbyterian Church. Her achievement only threw the obstacles into greater relief. In the traditions of the black church, a revered woman might lead the Usher Board or the Home Missionary Society or even be extolled as a “mother of the church.” But a black woman who wanted to actually *lead* a congregation had little choice but to open her own storefront church. Though the major black denominations had few formal restrictions on women in the ministry—Baptists let every member church ordain whomever it found worthy, and the African Methodist Episcopalians explicitly allowed female ordination—in practice, the pulpit was a man’s place and the pew was a woman’s. So when Suzan Johnson Cook broke the news to her family that she was changing careers, her mother, Dorothy, a practical woman, asked across the dishes, “Are you sure this is what you want to do?”

Midway through a dreary, drizzly Monday afternoon, during what should be one of the few lulls of Holy Week, Johnson Cook joins the crowd of 80 finding seats in Harlem’s venerable Convent Avenue Baptist Church. Here amid the elegant brownstones of Sugar Hill, in a sanctuary replete with hand-carved altar rails and light fixtures styled on antique gas lamps, gather the clerical elite who form the regional Baptist Ministers’ Conference. Until the mid-nineties, its constitution barred women, and even at this recent session Johnson Cook is the only female pastor.

Nothing in her manner, though, suggests the slightest discomfort. In the church lobby, she chats with Jacques DeGraff, a friend of her older brother’s who is a veteran political consultant as well as an aspiring preacher. She lines him up for a couple of sermons at Bronx Christian Fellowship, planting the idea that he might collaborate in the television ministry she is developing. A fellow preacher, meanwhile, asks Johnson Cook to participate in the conference’s program for Martin Luther King Day in 2001.

“That is the Baptist golf course,” she says as she leaves. “A lot of the sisters don’t understand it’s not just about being invited to this pulpit or that conference. It’s these informal things. And I’m in the loop.”

Her journey into the loop began in December 1980, when Wells licensed her as a minister, the first step toward ordination. Nine months later, she entered Union Theological Seminary, and as James Forbes, the celebrated minister of Riverside Church, taught her the eloquent art of homiletics, Wells appointed her youth minister. When he ordained Johnson Cook on March 6, 1982, halfway through her seminary studies, he did so under the aegis not of the black National Baptist Convention but of the overwhelmingly white American Baptist Churches of Metropolitan New York/USA—which black congregations join primarily for its pension benefits and publishing house.

One year later the Mariners' Temple invited Johnson to become interim pastor. On the surface, the position looked impressive. Founded in 1795, Mariners' was the oldest Baptist church in New York and had been led by 25 consecutive men. But within the imposing pillars, Johnson discovered on her first Sunday in the pulpit, fifteen worshippers languished in a sanctuary built for 1,100. The annual heating bill alone, some \$40,000, exceeded the church's income. Deep inside Chinatown, Mariners' was a black church in a neighborhood without blacks. Week after week, Johnson Cook watched male preachers deliver their audition sermons for the pastor's job—and quickly head for the door.

“They'd say, ‘Girl, this is not me. You can have it if you want it,’ ” she recalls. “But I refused to think of Mariners' as a defeated place. I wasn't going there just to close it down.” The impediments, she soon discovered, very much included her gender. One minister refused to baptize candidates in the same font Johnson Cook has used. Another had her preach at his church—and pad out his own paltry congregation with her adherents—only to follow her sermon with a denunciation of female ordination.

Using the skills she had acquired in Charles's campaign for the Assembly, Johnson Cook went door-to-door with a handful of loyalists in the Lower East side's housing projects, spreading the word of her ministry. Within six months, she had lifted membership to 150 and won full-time appointment in a unanimous vote, making her the first black woman to be a senior pastor in the American Baptist denomination. Her area may not have been home to many blacks, but plenty of middle-class people like her parents worked in the neighborhood's government offices. Sujay inaugurated the “Lunch Hour of Power,” a worship service every Wednesday at noon that was equal parts theology, sing-along, and motivational lecture. By 1990, it was drawing 500 regulars, a number equal to her Sunday congregation, and inspiring similar services by such renowned black ministers as Johnny Ray Youngblood of Saint Paul Community Baptist Church in Brooklyn. (The service is now held nearby, at the John Street United Methodist Church.)

Indeed, Youngblood gave her what she considered the ultimate nod of acceptance. “Sujoy,” he told her while both were studying in the same doctoral program in the late eighties, “you're part of the frat.” The daughter and sister of strong black men—and, since 1991, the wife of one--she had met the black church's most concrete measure of achievement. The same credential plainly mattered to the Clinton administration when it chose Johnson Cook first as a White House fellow and then as one of just seven members of the president's Initiative on Race and Reconciliation.

At the same time, Johnson Cook served black women less as a crusader than as a role model. She mentored younger ministers, including her successor at Mariners' Temple. She delivered, by her own reckoning, the majority of her sermons on biblical women,

from the warrior and prophetess Deborah to the New Testament's Anna, a widow who waited until she was 84 to see the Messiah arrive.

In the five books she wrote or edited, Johnson Cook particularly addressed black women in the middle class and the professions. She is president of the New York Coalition of 100 Black Women, a sort of modern version of what W.E.B. DuBois famously called the "Talented Tenth." Her collection of devotions, *Sister Strength*, included a section on "Surviving in Corporate America." Asked to name the most influential book she's read, model turned restaurateur Barbara Smith cites Johnson Cook's *Too Blessed to Be Stressed*, a thoughtful autobiography hiding behind a self-help title.

"I want women to take advantage of whatever crack the door has been opened," Johnson Cook says. "And when you do that, you have no time for whining. You're too busy doing."

Still, the so-called stained-glass ceiling often restricts black women to the smallest congregations; those who lead larger churches typically have had to build them. The question about Suzan Johnson Cook, says the Reverend Delores Carpenter, a professor at Howard University who has researched the subject extensively, is why, given her track record, none of the populous megachurches have called her. It's the rare inquiry that makes Johnson Cook bristle. She is equally bothered by the suggestion that her ministry, precisely because she is so eclectically talented, lacks the focus on a particular cause that has made Flake a national figure in school vouchers and Youngblood one in community organizing.

"It's not a matter of being all over the place," she says of her calling. "Jesus was a multitasker." She sees affluent blacks drifting away from church, and away from the inner-city neighborhoods that desperately need their expertise and example.

"The black middle class is a different definition of *unchurched*," she says. "My generation was born to parents who migrated from the rural South and went through the civil-rights movements. And a lot of us left the traditions that got them over. We didn't raise our children with a connection to church. It was 'country.' It reminded us of the past. It took away Sundays, when now we're invited to play golf or tennis. But if you can excite the professionals, the people with resources, that's how real change can occur."

Johnson Cook's program for Bronx Christian Fellowship is duly diverse. She is using her fluency in Spanish to draw Hispanic worshippers who have tended to be culturally and denominationally outside the black church. Her career-training programs, including one for the Internet economy, have already won a \$100,000 grant from USA Networks.

The Bronx pulpit also lets Johnson Cook stay close to home and family, in the same Grand Concourse high-rise as her mother. After nearly a lifetime in this city, she can still stroll up 145<sup>th</sup> Street in Harlem, near her mother's old school and her father's old church, and be hailed as Wilbert's or Dorothy's daughter. She juggles her schedule around her older son's baseball games. She met her husband, a community development director at Convent Avenue Baptist Church, when both were making a Lenten fast, and Ron's own intimate understanding of the church makes him a vital sounding board.

So on Monday afternoon of Holy Week, Johnson Cook leaves the Baptist Ministers' Conference shortly before four o'clock to head for her Toyota sport utility vehicle, its floor and seats covered by a tennis racket, a Grover doll, a tangerine, and other detritus of domesticity. She will pick up her older son, 7-year-old Samuel, at an Episcopal school in Morningside Heights and take him to join his brother Christopher, 5, at a birthday party in a craft store on the Upper West Side. In the school bathroom, she hastily changes from the conservative skirt she very deliberately wore to the ministers' conference into casual pants.

In her personal balancing act as much as in her public ministry, Sujay practices patience as a "strategy for the long run." "We trust God to bring good things to pass," she adds. "We bring a quiet strength. What Martin Luther King said about knowing that we as a people will get into the Promised Land—that's the theology that carries us over. When I get the nod from God, nothing will stop me from going forth on that mission. The scripture that sustains me is Matthew 5:16: to be light in the midst of darkness."