

## **THE POSITIVE COMMUNITY**

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Dr. Sujay to head Hampton Conference

by Jean Nash Wells

As the first woman to be elected president of the Hampton University Minister's Conference, Rev. Dr. Suzan Johnson Cook has added another first to her burgeoning list of accomplishments. She is also the youngest person to hold the top spot of the conference, the oldest and largest for African American clergy in the world.

Dr. Cook was the first African American woman to be elected to an American Baptist church in its 200-year history. She is New York City Police Department's only female chaplain. She was the only African American woman and faith community leader appointed by President Clinton to the historic President's Initiative on Race. She is president emeritus of the New York Coalition of 100 Black Women and served on the Democratic Policy Council in the White House in 1993 and with the HUD Secretary for Faith Initiatives from 1994 to 1997.

When friends and family gathered at Harlem's Sugar Hill Bistro to celebrate her election, so many well wishers arrived that the Bistro could not hold them, and the celebration was moved around the corner to Convent Avenue Baptist Church. Among national and local clergy leaders to offer congratulations were outgoing President Rev. Dr. Walter Scott Thomas of New Psalmist Baptist Church in Baltimore, Bishop T.D. Jakes and Rev. John R. Bryant, Bishop of the 16<sup>th</sup> A.M.E. Episcopal District.

Cook, who inaugurated the hugely successful Wednesday Lunch Hour of Power services when she was pastor of Mariner's Temple Baptist Church in lower Manhattan, says her plans as president of the Hampton Minister's Conference include developing programming that will provide members with tools for "ministering out of the box." Those "out of the box" lunch hour services drew people out of corporate offices in droves. It is this kind of vision that has made the Bronx Fellowship Christian Church where she has pastored since 1996 one of the fastest growing churches in the Bronx.

Frequently recognized and commended for her work both in and out of church, Dr. Cook was selected by Ebony Magazine as one of the top 15

women in ministry in the nation in 1997, and in the same year she was honored by Time Out magazine as one of New York's top five preachers.

The Hampton Minister's Conference which convenes annually in June at Hampton University, represents over 10,000 African American churches of all denominations, with an aggregate 3 million congregants from churches of varying sizes of less than 200 to 26,000 members. "It's the Black preacher's Mecca for inspiration, restoration and renewal," said Dr. Cook. "It affords clergy from throughout the country to network with the best in our vocation in leadership training, workshops and plenary sessions, and we look forward to getting together during this time each year. My mission is to provide members with programmatic and logistical cutting edge tools for ministry in the new millennium."

Rev. B.J. Whipper Jr. president of the Baptist Minister's Conference of Greater New York & Vicinity was effusive in his praise of Dr. Cook. "I have known Dr. Cook since she first entered the ministry, and as such a young person she has accomplished many firsts," he said. "Her elevation to the presidency of the Hampton Minister's Conference is a great step forward in the process of liberation. As people of color we should never forget that the struggle is not over, and as a woman who happens to be Black, there are many hurdles she has overcome. Now her ascendancy should give hope to every person who has struggled to be their best. I rejoice in the fact that the Hampton Minister's Conference has exercised equal opportunity. To God be the glory."

Indeed, Dr. Cook has shown herself to be worthy of that kind of praise. Her ministry is not just confined to her own church, she is ever ready to do the Lord's work wherever it takes her. Following the tragic events of September 11, Dr. Cook was there, providing intense trauma counseling to rescue workers, survivors and families who lost loved ones. She also performed over 40 funerals and memorial services.

Summing up her response to the challenge that lies before her, Dr. Sujay told *The Positive Community*, "I encourage and solicit the prayers of the saints to be open to the movement of the Holy Spirit. I thank God for the opportunity that has been presented to me to lead our church leaders into the 21<sup>st</sup> century and I'm also deeply appreciative that my peers and colleagues have confidence in me to provide such leadership."