

YOUR NEIGHBORHOOD

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She brings the Word home

Pastor glories in fellowship little Bronx church offers

By **JOSE MARTINEZ**
DAILY NEW WRITER

The Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook has advised President Clinton on race relations, lectured at Harvard and won *over media moguls*.

But she's most at home in a small church on an out-of-the-way street just east of the Bronx River Parkway.

That's where, after four nomadic years, Johnson Cook's Bronx Christian Fellowship Church has settled down.

The church was founded in 1996 with five members and a weekly Tuesday night service at the Bronx Museum of the Arts.

Today, the church will wrap up its two-day Victory Celebration in the one-time synagogue it purchased in March. The church also is publicly thanking USA Networks boss Barry Diller for a \$100,000 donation that will help jump-start its economic development programs.

"It's a new beginning for us," said Johnson Cook, who in 1990 was appointed the New York Police Department's first female chaplain.

"This is the anointed and the appointed place for us."

The journey to the Bronx was a circuitous one for Johnson Cook, a former television producer.

Raised in Williamsbridge, she was pastor for 13 years, at Manhattan's Mariners' Temple Baptist Church, where she organized weekly Lunch Hour of Power services for Wall Street types.

Then came the dream that called her home.

In early 1996, she took her lunch hour service up-town and started similar services at the Epworth United Methodist Church in Concourse Village.

"I received a vision from God saying, 'This is your new community,' " she said. "It was time to come back home."

In June 1996, she left Mariners' Temple to found her own church.

A small flock followed her to rented quarters at the Bronx Museum of the Arts, the first home of the newly incorporated Bronx Christian Fellowship Church.

"I had a very good thing going downtown," said Johnson Cook. "I had built Mariners' from 15 to 1,000 members, so of course, people wondered, 'Are you crazy?'"

At each stop, the crowds swelled. After a stint at the museum, the church shifted to a former bank in The Hub area of the South Bronx, and then into another abandoned bank near Yankee Stadium.

"We gave out church flyers in the heat and in the cold to test what this community wanted," said Coral Aubert, one of the church's five founding members.

"And they wanted this ministry. They were waiting for it."

In October, the church began sharing space with Temple Judea. The reform Jewish congregation moved on in March, after Bronx Christian Fellowship Church paid the \$150,000 down payment for the building.

Stained glass once decorated with the Star of David has given way to images of a cross. The area that once stored the ark is now cloaked in an African garment.

Mentoring, sports and dance programs are up and running. There are plans to start youth sports leagues and scouting troops.

There also are economic development programs that Diller's donation is helping to bankroll.

"We're starting to see the fruits of our labor," said James Jones Jr., the church's head trustee. "It seems as if she has been ordained to lead us to great things."

The donation will help create a technical training center, a career development center and other programs. The goal, Johnson cook said, is to "empower people."

"It was really her vision for the ministry that got me interested," said minister of music Gregory Thomas, who joined the church in January. "It wasn't just Sunday morning; it was about feeding the entire man, mind, body and soul."

Johnson Cook said her approach grew from her wide-ranging past. She was a President's Administrative Fellow at Harvard, where she taught for three years.

She heads the New York Coalition of 100 Black Women, the city's largest African-American women's civic group.

And she's served on President Clinton's Race Advisory Board, and on the White House Domestic Policy Council as a consultant to the Department of Housing and Urban Development.

Now Johnson Cook is back in the Bronx after realizing her latest vision in four fast years.

"I'm a mega-dreamer," she said.

"I'm excited that everything happened this quickly, but I'm a fast mover. Now our dreams can just get bigger."