

# Woman leads black ministers' meeting\_60903

October 10, 2003

Posted: 6/06/03

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**By Adelle Banks**

*Religion News Service*

HAMPTON, Va. (RNS)—For decades, African-American clergy from across the nation have reserved the first week of June for a time of respite and renewal near the Chesapeake Bay.

But this year, for the first time, the Hampton University Ministers' Conference opened June 2 with a presidential address by a woman. Under the new leadership of Suzan Johnson Cook, an American Baptist minister from the Bronx, N.Y, the 89th annual event marked a juncture in the long tradition of what is known as the largest interdenominational gathering of black ministers in the country.

“It's a brand new day,” she preached, not only referring to herself but encouraging the opening session crowd of 7,500 to let the conference be a fresh starting point for them as well. “If you will just be open to the power of God, God's power can be poured upon your life in an amazing new way.”

Before she preached, the 46-year-old minister nicknamed “Dr. Sujay” took time out especially for her sisters in the faith. After she asked all the female ministers in the arena to stand, she declared: “Don't quit. ... Tonight is a living testimony that God rewards faithfulness. Don't give up.”

The conference, which its president and others call the “Mecca for black preachers,” reached a new stage with the election of Cook in 2002 and her first address a year later. Dignitaries dubbed “first ladies of the civil rights movement” sat on the dais of the conference to mark the transition.

“This is a great moment in the history of our country, and it surely is a great moment for women,” declared Dorothy Height, president emeritus of the National Council of Negro Women.

Coretta Scott King congratulated the conference. “You have sent a clarion message that women do indeed have a leadership role to play in religious life,” she said.

Experts on black church life agreed, comparing Cook's election to strides made by women in denominational settings, like the 2000 election of Bishop Vashti McKenzie as the first female bishop of the African Methodist Episcopal Church.

But Mary Sawyer, author of a book on black ecumenical relations, said the conference's advancement of a woman leader may be even more significant.

“It's an interdenominational conference and it suggests recognition and acceptance by a broad spectrum of the church”,” said Sawyer, an associate professor of religious studies at Iowa State University in Ames.

Cook and others acknowledge that everyone did not view her election as a cause for celebration.

“There's a lot of guys that didn't even come this year because of a woman president, but I'm of the opinion if God has called you, who am I to judge you?” said Samuel Blow, pastor of a Baltimore church affiliated with the National Baptist Convention USA.

James Forbes, pastor of New York's Riverside Church and Cook's seminary professor, noted that her leadership experience—offering a weekly ministry on Wall Street, working on domestic policy issues with the Clinton administration—caused her to be “fully credentialed” for the post. Other clergy said just like officers that preceded her, Cook worked her way through the ranks of the organization, serving at one point as necrologist, responsible for noting the deaths of ministers since the previous conference.

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