

Pastor slated to be religious freedom envoy: America's chaplain

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President Obama has named Suzan Johnson Cook, a well-connected but politically inexperienced pastor from New York, as his nominee to be ambassador-at-large for international religious freedom.

“Johnson Cook is an experienced religious leader with a passion for human rights and an impressive record of public service,” Secretary of State Hillary Rodham Clinton said in a mid-June statement. “President Obama could not have found a more fitting choice for this important position.”

Johnson Cook, dubbed “America’s chaplain” in her publicity materials, founded Bronx Christian Fellowship Church in New York in 1996. In 2002, she was the first woman elected to head the prestigious Hampton University Ministers’ Conference of black clergy.

Known as a dynamic preacher and self-help guru—the *New York Times* called her a cross between Billy Graham and Oprah Winfrey—Johnson Cook advised the Clinton White House on racial issues. “For me, there’s never been a choice of faith or politics,” she said in an interview last fall. “It’s the fusion of both and how I can be helpful but not compromised.”

Some religious freedom advocates, already upset by Obama’s tardiness in filling the job, say Johnson Cook’s lack of foreign policy experience is a troubling sign that the issue will be marginalized at a time when myriad global conflicts are driven by religion.

“If the Obama administration were taking this seriously, it would choose an expert in international religious freedom with experience in foreign affairs,” said Thomas Farr, a former director of the State Department’s religious freedom office. Farr called Johnson Cook an “accomplished pastor,” but said “the cards are heavily stacked against her before she even steps into the job.”

Robert Seiple, who was the first to hold the post under President Bill Clinton, said it can be difficult for outsiders to navigate the State Department's complex bureaucracy and grasp the nuances of foreign policy.

Still, being a politically appointed outsider can have its benefits, said Randolph Marshall Bell, a career diplomat who now runs the First Freedom Center, a Virginia-based center for religious rights.

"Classically, people talk about political appointments as having access to the president and the administration through political channels," Bell said, "that might not be open to a career officer."

Johnson Cook is a familiar face among the Clintons; she was a White House fellow under Bill Clinton and campaigned for Hillary Rodham Clinton in 2008. Last fall, she said she had advised both the secretary of state and Obama on spiritual issues. –

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