

Obama nominates pastor to international religious freedom post

WASHINGTON – President Barack Obama announced the nomination of the Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook to be ambassador at large for international religious freedom.

He said June 15 that Americans will “be well served by the expertise and commitment” of Cook and of the two nominees he announced for the U.S. Commission on International Religious Freedom.

Speaking about Rev. Cook, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said Obama could not have found “a more fitting choice for this important position.”

“I look forward to working with Dr. Johnson Cook, if she is confirmed, to bring greater focus to international efforts to ensure that people everywhere enjoy the global standards of religious freedom enshrined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights,” Clinton said.

As ambassador-at-large, Rev. Cook will serve as principle adviser on religious freedom to Clinton and the Obama administration.

She will be supported by the Office of International Religious Freedom in the State Department’s Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights and Labor, whose staff monitors religious persecution and discrimination worldwide.

The office produces an annual report on religious freedom around the world. It also has roles in public diplomacy and in public affairs.

The ambassadorial post has been vacant since Obama took office.

Obama’s nominations for the commission are current member Felice D. Gaer and William J. Shaw, who is past president of the National Baptist Convention and a Philadelphia-based pastor.

Both the office and the commission were established by the 1998 International Religious Freedom Act.

The commission is an independent, bipartisan government agency charged with reviewing violations of religious freedom throughout the world and making appropriate policy recommendations to the president, secretary of state and Congress.

Past members have included U.S. Catholic leaders such as Cardinal Theodore E. McCarrick, now retired as archbishop of Washington; Bishop William F. Murphy of Rockville Centre, N.Y.; Bishop Ricardo Ramirez of Las Cruces, N.M.; and Archbishop Charles J. Chaput of Denver.

Rev. Cook's nomination follows a letter sent to Obama at the end of March urging him to quickly fill the post. It was signed by 29 people associated with religious and civil rights organizations.

One of the signers was John L. Esposito, founding director of the Prince Alwaleed bin Talal Center for Muslim-Christian Understanding at Georgetown University and a professor of religion and international affairs and of Islamic studies.

"A good appointee will promote religious freedom, and at the same time not promote their personal belief," Esposito told Catholic News Service June 16 in a telephone interview.

"Because the president communicated a strong sense of personal respect for (Rev.) Cook in his statements, I think she will have direct communication with him," he said.

"A lot is going to depend on her sense of values and personal skill with this role, as with any candidate, but I wish her the best," he added.

Rev. Cook's experience includes serving as senior pastor of Bronx Christian Fellowship Baptist Church in New York and a chaplain for the New York Police Department. She is founder of a group called Wisdom Worldwide Center. She is executive director of the Multi-Ethnic Center Inc., also in the Bronx.

She was a professor at New York Theological Seminary from 1988 to 1996.

Rev. Cook holds a bachelor's degree in science from Emerson College, a master of

arts from Columbia University's Teachers College, a master's of divinity from Union Theological Seminary in New York, and a doctorate in ministry from United Theological Seminary in Dayton, Ohio.

The ambassador-at-large post has an important role "in spreading religious tolerance around the world," State Department spokeswoman Nicole Thompson told CNS.