

Hour of Power

Word Is Heard at Lunchtime Service At Chinatown's Only Black Church

By Lana Bortolot

The large ship's bell on the portico of the Mariner's Temple Baptist Church (3 Henry St.) has been silent for decades, but the call to worship here needs no ringing of bells: People are pulled in every Wednesday at noon for an over-the-hump service that fills Chinatown's only black church.

The Lunch Hour of Power, a tradition here since 1985, "provides encouragement in the middle of the week, in the middle of the day," says the Rev. Henrietta Carter, senior pastor at Mariner's. And rain, shine or a beautiful low-humidity day doesn't stop the faithful from coming.

But if you're a newcomer, it's an act of faith to wait it out and see who does come. On a recent Wednesday, the only activity at noon involved a few lay volunteers readying materials in the side aisles. An audio-visual technician in the upper gallery tested equipment on a screen hung in front of a huge Corinthian column. A grand piano and drum set at the front looked promising, but at 12:10 p.m., when the ministerial team mounted the pulpit, only a handful of worshippers were to be served.

A lone woman stood to the side. Incongruous with her fanny pack, Jane Fonda-style headband and Asian features, it appeared she was a misplaced tourist. But as the service leaders hummed and revved up into song, she swayed, arms raised above her head, putting an uncertain stamp on her identity.

At 12:15 p.m., a hum came from the pulpit: "What a mighty God we serve, hmm, what a mighty God we serve, hmm." Ushers escorted stragglers to seats. The fanny-packed woman greeted an elderly woman in a wheelchair and helped her into the pew. She leaned forward and hugged new arrivals, aligning herself with the congregation — just another anomaly in this church of anomalies.

Founded in 1795, Mariner's was a mission church serving sailors on the East River waterfront. As commerce there dwindled, so did the congregation. When the Rev. Suzan Johnson Cook — the church's first female pastor — came onboard and created the Hour of Power, Mariner's was infused with new life. Under her aegis, attendance grew, with up to 500 people packing the church on Wednesdays.

At 12:20 p.m., a surge hit the historic sanctuary. This was no fancy-hat-wearing crowd; baseball and newsboy caps were the order of the day. Carter says most of the mid-week worshippers come from downtown companies, the courts and City of New York offices. At 12:21, the audio-visual equipment went live, and as if on cue, the congregation rolled into song: "The Holy Ghost's power is moving just like a magnet, moving here, moving there, the Holy Ghost's power is moving just like a magnet."

People now rose, age and infirmity notwithstanding. Swelled in song, they pushed the air above with open palms or splayed fingers. The choir, clad in purple and

lavender, filed in. The Rev. Olene Yarborough, a chic, trim figure in a cream pantsuit and neckscarf, took the pulpit and asked the congregation to give visitors a "five-star welcome." This was no genteel Episcopalian handshake — people here crossed the pews and aisles with two-handed clasps and heartily intoned, "God bless you."



Holy Hymns: Singer spreads the word

At 12:33 p.m. Sister Michele Witherspoon, minister of music, ushered the choir to the front. From the back, one sensed all her power was in her hair — large, soft dreadlocks falling like tassels around her head, bobbing when her directing arm punctuated the air. But when she faced the congregation, one realized the power was in her voice. It was the offertory, and Sister Michele meant to stir souls into giving it up. The old floor undulated under the motion of bodies swaying and clapping. The ushers passed the baskets. Everyone sang and clapped: "Standing in the need of a blessing, standing in the need of a blessing." Drums like a soft heartbeat sustained the tithing until the basket passed through all the pews. The choir receded into a hum and cleared the stage for the action yet to come.

It was 12:37 p.m. Guest pastor the Rev. Henry Harrison, from the Harlem Baptist House of Prayer, ascended the pulpit. His voice at first

was a rousing mantra of "hallelujahs," set a half-beat between the fading strains of the choir and the increasingly loud clapping of the congregation, numbering some 300 now. By 12:43 p.m., he had launched fully and urgently into the message: "When you endure, you have the ability to withstand tribulation," he said, punctuated by cries of "Yes!" from the congregation. "You have to be steadfast under pressure — pressure in the home, pressure at work, pressure in the streets. You must perform in the midst of difficulties under pressure. You must hold on."

The pastor mopped his brow with a towel. Organ chords punctuated his speech, anticipating, heralding his next counsel.

"Jesus. I'm gonna trust him. Even if he's gonna slay me. Is anyone going through fire? It's going to be heated. It's going to come to a boiling point. Hold on! Hold on to God's unchanging hand. Endure! Endure like a good soldier!"

The reverend emerged from behind the pulpit. His glasses were in his hand, being offered up to the ceiling. No one was sitting; from the back of the sanctuary, he was visible only through waving arms and on the projected screen. It was hard to know in which form he was larger.

Down from the pulpit stage, on the main floor, he stopped; the congregants' responses did not. The sanctuary had a pulse of its own. The pastor let his people take the message in, and at 12:53 p.m. he said, "Thank you for your words. God bless."

At 12:55 p.m., people emptied the aisles. Many formed a polite queue at the front receiving line for the ministerial team. Mission accomplished for another Wednesday. ■

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