

# AKOMA: A HERSTORICAL CHRONOLOGY

## AKOMA HERSTORY 2015-2016

We cannot change the past, but we can change our attitude toward it. Uproot guilt & change forgiveness. Tear out arrogance & seed humility.  
Exchange LOVE for hate; thereby, making the present comfortable & the future promising. -Maya Angelou

### OVERVIEW

AKOMA is Rochester's African American Women's Gospel Choir whose West African Akan name means patience, endurance, consistency and faithfulness. AKOMA's Adinkra symbol, the heart, indicates compassion, tenderness and charity. AKOMA's vocal and spoken word ministry is rooted in the African American sacred song and oral traditions.

After a debut performance in August of 1995 for Woman Fest-a day-long celebration of the 75<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Women's Right to vote-the group of thirty-five women decided to embrace a musical ministry that reflects their diverse faith traditions and love for gospel music. The group adopted the name AKOMA because it symbolizes their African heritage, spiritual roots and desire to serve the Rochester community. Dr. David A. Anderson/Sankofa recommended the name AKOMA, based on research and knowledge of the group's mission. Thirty Rochester area churches currently are represented on AKOMA's 2015 roster of 55 active sister-members.

On June 22, 1996, AKOMA made her debut concert and established the Nona Patterson Chambers (NPC) Scholarship in honor of her elder member and adopted mother. Three recipients received the Mother Nona Scholarship in its first year. Since that time and including the eight 2016 recipients, AKOMA has awarded one hundred and five college-bound young African American women, a portion of the more than \$105,000 collected as a part of the NPC Scholarship fund.

### 2015 [20<sup>th</sup> Anniversary Concert year] - May 2016

In June of 2015, more than 1,000 supporters joined in as AKOMA celebrated her 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary at Mt. Olivet Baptist Church. The sanctuary filled with praise & prayer as AKOMA welcomed back many of her retired and on-leave sisters including founding music director, Janet R. Poles and succeeding director Karen Summers, along with founding NPC Scholarship chair, conductor, & soloist, Dr. Cheryl G. Holloway. A number of past recipients gathered to honor the new awardees. The Honorable Congressperson Louise Slaughter attended the concert and sent a letter of congratulations. Truly, "Grace Has Brought Us," as the anniversary theme attested. In response to her year-long "20 for 20" NPC scholarship appeal, more than \$20,000 in donations was collected from program appearances, donors, and the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary concert's freewill offering--- bringing the scholarship's grand total to \$87,700. Earlier in 2015, AKOMA sang, in August, at the classic Clarissa Street Reunion. October found the sisters at Holy Apostles church, followed by a special concert engagement in January of 2016 at the Memorial Art Gallery's Ebony Fashion Fair exhibit. February's City of Rochester Heritage Concert, "Of Hallowed Ground," was celebrated with the rousing men's choir, the Voices of Thunder. In March the AKOMA EAST Concert took place at Fairport Community Baptist Church (FCBC) where the FCBC female choir members joined with AKOMA for the first section of the concert.

### ADDITIONAL CHRONOLOGY

#### 2014-May 2015

AKOMA ushered in her 20th year of service as she participated in the "Celebrating A Life" concert in September 2014 in honor of the life and work of Rev. Dr. Charles Thurman. In November, we raised our voices in praise at Memorial AME Zion Baptist Church. AKOMA and the Voices of Thunder were again featured in February at the City of Rochester's Annual African American Heritage Gospel Concert held at First Genesis Baptist Church. March found us at Nazareth College where our "Equality for Women is Progress for All" concert celebrated International Women's Day. MJS Productions honored AKOMA in April with its Spiritual Woman Warrior Award at their 2015 Women and Girls Empowerment Award celebration. Mother's Day weekend AKOMA provided music for the Jefferson Avenue Seventh Day Adventist Church's annual Women's Day Celebration.

#### 2012-August 2013

In August of 2012, AKOMA endorsed her third executive music director, Ms. Gloria Brooks who began her work with the sister-ministry in September. In October, AKOMA provided music for the Young Women of Color Empowerment Conference's worship service that was held at Elim Christian Fellowship. In February, AKOMA and the Voices of Thunder were featured at the Annual Heritage Gospel Concert that was held at Immaculate Conception Church. In March, AKOMA traveled to Spencerport where she gave a featured concert at St. John's the Evangelist Church. August will find the sisters planning and relaxing at their annual retreat. The theme is "Mind, Body, Spirit Investing in You". AKOMA lost two of her founding members: Hattie Welch (January 5, 2013) & Marguerite B. Lucas (April 16, 2013).

February of 2012, AKOMA was featured with the Voices of Thunder in Rochester's Annual Heritage Concert. AKOMA created the theme--- STEPPING OUT, LIFTING UP, and MOVING THROUGH: A CHORAL CELEBRATION OF BLACK WOMEN--- in recognition of the 2012 national focus on Black women in American history & culture. At the end of the 2012 Scholarship Concert, AKOMA said good bye to her second executive music director, KAREN C. SUMMERS who decided to retire.

On December 24, 2011, AKOMA bid a sad farewell to 101 year old Mother Nona Patterson Chambers, their oldest and most cherished member & for whom their

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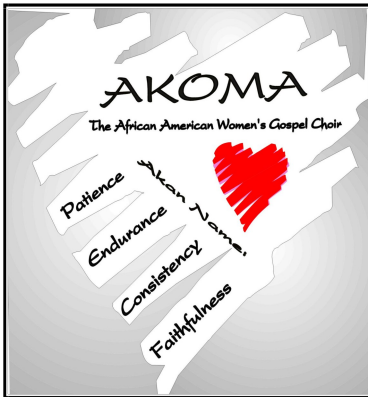
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scholarship was named.

At the 2011 scholarship concert, AKOMA celebrated the 16 years of musical service provided by her founding conductor and principal soloist, DR. CHERYL MCGRUDER HOLLOWAY, as well as the tireless dedication to the sisterhood of Sister Cheryl's spouse, Attorney Oscar Holloway. On Sunday, October 24, 2010, AKOMA presented the last performance of the Bicentennial Concert Series of the First Presbyterian Church of Avon. The series was supported in part by a grant from the New York State Council on the Arts. In February, AKOMA was featured, along with the Voices of Thunder, for the Annual Heritage Concert hosted by the City of Rochester and the Heritage Committee. In March, AKOMA was the sole performer for the Music of the Movement Concert for Strong Museum's *Making American Music Concert Series*.

From July through March of 2009, AKOMA brought gospel music to the Greater Rochester community in six concerts: On July 31, at the River City Rhythms Concert at Corn Hill Landing with our guests: the Nat Turner Drum Circle and the Immaculate Conception Liturgical Dancers; On August 15, 2009, at the annual Clarissa Street Reunion; November 1 to the First Congregational United Church of Christ in Fairport; Less than two weeks later, an evening concert at St. John's Church in Spencerport; On February 20, with our adopted brothers--- the Voices of Thunder--- for the Annual Heritage Concert ; and finally on March 24, we ended our outside engagements with a full concert at Keuka College. We then hosted our 14<sup>th</sup> Annual Scholarship Concert. Early in 2009, AKOMA added to her wonderful store of memorable experiences: January of 2009 at SUNY-Geneseo's Martin Luther King, Jr. Commemorative Program. The keynote address was delivered by Dr. Arlette Miller Smith, followed by the concert: "Lifting Weary Voices, Raising Freedom's Song: Black Sacred Music as Resistance in the Civil Rights Movement." On April 23, 2009, AKOMA and the Voices of Thunder, joined the Rochester Philharmonic, under the direction of Jeff Tyzik at the Eastman School of Music for TOTAL PRAISE, a gospel concert that celebrated the City's 175<sup>th</sup> anniversary. An audience of more than 2,200 supported the collaboration..

In September, we said "Hello" to several new members and a teary, heartfelt yet jubilant "Goodbye" to our then president Nancy Walters, who went to her heavenly home in September, 2009. We honor Nancy as a dedicated, faith-filled leader of AKOMA whose example of Christian living and sisterly love blessed us and who will be in our heart forever. And in October, AKOMA also lost her first videographer, Bro. Ben Pinkston— son-in-law of Mother Nona & husband of sister-member Esther Pinkston.



In January, 2008 AKOMA created a herstorical concert called "Women Voicing in the Dream" at Hobart William Smith Colleges for their Annual Martin Luther King address. The keynote address, "Armored Resisters: African American Women in the Modern Civil Rights Movement," was delivered by AKOMA's founder and executive director, Dr. Arlette Miller Smith. The Sisters also joined the Voices of Thunder again for the Annual Heritage Gospel Concert, which was held in February at Mt Olivet Baptist Church.

In 2006-2007, AKOMA's ministry schedule expanded with a number of new outreach venues including singing at St. John's Catholic Church in Brockport and at First Congregational United Church of Christ in Fairport. In February, the Sisters joined the Brothers of the Voices of Thunder in a combined concert as a part of the heritage celebration. Even the summer of 2007 was filled with AKOMA's music and cultural messages as she traveled to Buffalo to provide a music ministry for the National Black Catholic Congress, in addition to two other summer engagements. The most significance change in the life of AKOMA during 2006-2007 was the home-going of four dedicated long-time members who are now "Sisters on the Other Side": Brenda Robinson, Martha Davis-Wilcox, Sharon Williams, and Eula Bostick.

During 2005-2006, AKOMA's ministry included the following engagements: the annual Pennington-Moye VFW Post concert; the Penfield Symphony Annual Christmas Concert; the William Warfield Scholarship Concert; Memorial Art Gallery's & the Arts & Cultural Council's *Women's Voices: African American Gospel Singers Program* in honor of National Women's History Month (*Sacred Songs of the Sisterhood*); and the Alpha Phi Alpha 74th Eastern Regional Conference Sunday Worship Service.

In 2004, at the Strong Museum AKOMA participated in a major production titled, "From Struggle to Strength: Gospel Then and Now," in which the group chronicled in song the evolution of gospel music as a means of strength through the struggle for freedom. As a part of Strong Museum's, "Creating American Music," Series *Struggle* was written and arranged by AKOMA's executive director, Dr. Arlette Miller Smith with assistance from sister-member Ramona Moore.

Since her 1995 inception year, AKOMA has been privileged to sing with Grammy Award winner Larnelle Harris; to appear on a number of local television shows; to provide music for a program featuring Seattle poet laureate Mona Lake Jones who wrote the poem, "A Room Full of Sisters" which AKOMA uses as her spoken word anthem; to provide the music for programs honoring Bishop Desmond Tutu; to sing with the Penfield Symphony at several of their annual holiday concerts; and to be featured at the National Black Catholic Congress Conference in Buffalo, New York. Early in her spiritual life, AKOMA also was blessed to present a commissioned docudrama, "Stirring the Waters, Tending the Pots," written by her founder, Arlette Miller Smith. "Stirring," a suffrage-related drama, was performed at Geva Theatre as a part of the 150th anniversary of the women's rights convention at Seneca Falls.

**AKOMA's current executive music director is Gloria Brooks; the Scholarship Commission Chairperson is Donna M. Jones; the Director of Bookings and Concert Confirmation is Ruth Anderson. The Founder, Executive & Artistic Director is Dr. Arlette Miller Smith.**

**The herstory of AKOMA's evolution as an organization is the title of the unpublished dissertation: *Speaking the Song, Spreading the Word, Lifting the People---The Reimagination of Community Through Vocal Music Activism (2005)* by Dr. Arlette Miller Smith. Also in 2016,**

**Allison Thorp's 2016 dissertation, *Testify, Heal, Empower: A Phenomenological Investigation of Three Urban, socially Identified, Community Choirs*, includes the music, message, and ministry of AKOMA.**

**For AKOMA concert bookings, please email [akomagc@gmail.com](mailto:akomagc@gmail.com); visit our website at [www.akoma.org](http://www.akoma.org); "like" us on Facebook; and Twitter.**

*And with my song... will I praise Him. (Ps. 28:7)*