

Black Baptist group gets \$1 million to aid African girls

August 16, 2024

MEMPHIS, Tenn. (RNS)—A Baptist missions organization has received a \$1 million donation from a Virginia megachurch, boosting its efforts to help girls in Africa.

Lott Carey, a predominantly Black organization long known as the Lott Carey Baptist Foreign Mission Society, traditionally has held fundraisers as part of its annual gathering, which this year occurred Aug. 12-15 in Memphis, Tenn.

Lott Carey President Gina Stewart had announced beforehand she hoped to raise \$1 million on the last night of the convention. But Alfred Street Baptist Church, a historic Black church in Alexandria, Va., decided to raise money ahead of that occasion.

Alfred Street Pastor Howard-John Wesley told Religion News Service he learned during a church trip to Ghana arranged by Lott Carey Executive Secretary-Treasurer Emmett Dunn about the plight of girls caught up in the Trokosi tradition in that country.

Girls are turned over to priests at religious shrines for forced labor and ritual, sexual servitude as payment for the sins of their relatives. Although Ghana criminalized forced labor in 1998, Trokosi priests have continued to practice their servitude system “unchallenged” by law enforcement, according to child rights experts.

“It was our trip to Ghana that exposed us to the slave trade industry that you wouldn’t believe still existed in 2024,” Wesley said. “We really felt like God gave us an opportunity to make a difference in freeing some of these

young ladies.”

Support ministry of Ghana Baptists

The money will be used to support the ministry of the Ghana Baptist Convention, one of the largest denominations in Ghana, to rescue young girls whose families have sold them into the long-established system, opposed by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child.

The ministry works to rehabilitate the girls, teaching them at a vocational training center that aims to give them skills to allow them to reintegrate into society.

Stewart, the senior pastor of Christ Missionary Baptist Church in Memphis, said she too learned about Trokosi’s mistreatment of the girls during a trip to Africa.

“My journey to Liberia and Ghana with Lott Carey in 2022 was life-changing,” Stewart said in a statement. “Shortly thereafter, Rev. Dunn led a trip to Ghana with 100 Alfred Street members, and they too were blessed by the beauty of Ghana and shaken by the horrors of the dehumanizing indentured servitude known as the Trokosi tradition and vowed to make a difference.”

The \$1 million donation is rare for Lott Carey, which has an operational budget of \$2.5 million. It received an equal sum from Fountain Baptist Church in Summit, N.J., for relief efforts related to Hurricane Katrina.

Congregational raised funds through fasting

The donation sum also is not the first for Alfred Street, which gave \$1

million to the National Museum of African American History and Culture in 2015 and donated the same amount to Jackson State University, a historically Black institution in Mississippi, to help students and officials as they dealt with a crisis in 2022 after high levels of lead were found in its water.

About 950 people attended the Lott Carey meeting, including about 20 people from the Virginia church whose trips to the Memphis gathering were subsidized by the church. Alfred Street has about 2,000 people in attendance in person on Sundays and another 20,000 who watch online each week.

Wesley said his church raised the money through a 40-day fast in 2023 when members and supporters were asked to set aside daily devotional time and give up favorite foods, drinks and habits and use the money they would have spent on them for a donation.

“For me it was all wine, all caffeine, it was all sugar, all fried products—and all spending from Amazon,” he said.

In all, Wesley said, about 14,000 people participated, and some fasters gave more than the amount equivalent to their change in spending habits.

“They actually gave about \$870,000, and the church leadership said that’s too close to a million not to raise a million,” so the church used its Tithethe-Tithe Initiative, which gives 10 percent of weekly donations it receives to help community groups.

The infusion of money to support the girls in Africa comes as Stewart concludes her historic leadership of Lott Carey. In 2021, she became its first woman president, marking the first time a Black Baptist organization had chosen a female leader.

Stewart, a former Lott Carey first vice president, was succeeded as

president by First Vice President Jesse T. Williams Jr., senior pastor of Convent Avenue Baptist Church in Harlem.

Lott Carey, named for a former slave who gained his freedom and was a pioneer missionary in Africa, was founded in 1897.