

A Singular Anglican Life: Memories of Stott

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Uncle John, as we used to call him, was the dean of Evangelicals. He did more for networking Christians all around the globe than anyone else in our times. John Robert Walmsley Stott (April 27, 1921–July 27, 2011) became a Christian believer through England’s Varsity and Public School Camps. He became the rector of his family’s parish, All Souls Anglican Church, Langham Place, London. Despite pressure to separate, he defended staying within the Anglican Communion, which led to a sad rift with his friend Dr. Martin Lloyd-Jones, who advocated for splitting with the church and other institutions. Stott was a model churchman who believed there was a promising future for the Evangelical party within the Anglican communion.

Stott became a popular speaker in many circles. He was the regular devotional lecturer at InterVarsity’s Urbana conferences. He wrote over fifty books, most of them accessible to the lay reader. Among them is *Basic Christianity*, an international best-seller introducing readers to the fundamentals of the Christian faith. *The Cross of Christ* is arguably his most powerful presentation of the gospel. Along with Billy Graham he founded the Lausanne Movement in 1974, which produced the *Lausanne Covenant*, with its gentle corrective of Evangelical pietism. Through its subgroups Lausanne has had numerous subsequent extensions and is alive and well today. Stott traveled the world, ministering to church leaders around the globe. He also founded the Langham Trust, a foundation dedicated to promoting seminary training for majority-world students.

Several biographies exist.¹ I offer here some personal reflections on Uncle John and his deep influence on my life. My aim is to give readers a sense of his humanity and his outreach.

My first personal visit with John was in 1965. I had heard him speak in December 1964 at Urbana. I was a brand-new Christian, having had my life turned upside down the year before at L'Abri. One of my new Christian friends was Peter Moore, an Episcopal minister, the captivating founder of FOCUS, a unique ministry to independent school young people in North America. Stott had had a compelling influence on Peter. Peter urged me to go and meet him. I made my way to 12 Weymouth Place, where I was invited to lunch. Uncle John greeted me warmly at the door and ushered me into a large dining room. Some ten young men were seated around the table. His "boys" were trainees in the ministry. Conversation was rich. After lunch John took me to a secluded living room, where we talked for a couple of hours. It was then that I discovered his heart: his love for people. He once said to me, modestly, that he had a natural affection for all sorts and conditions. It was a gift from God. During our time, at his behest, I pummeled him with questions, which he calmly answered. He was full of grace. He put me on his mailing list so I could receive the biannual newsletter, composed until a few months before his death. These letters to thousands of readers were all signed and dedicated personally. Nearly all of them described a trip John had taken, and ... the exotic birds he had watched. John was an avid ornithologist, or a "birder," as the Brits called them.²

We kept in touch through correspondence and the occasional gatherings where we crossed paths. He always remembered me and our first meeting, which is saying something considering his hundreds of friends around the world. On one of these occasions, I once had the daunting task of preaching when he was in the congregation. Trembling, I spoke on Genesis 1:26, and he came up afterwards and thanked me for my "good Reformed theology." I don't think he was slain in the Spirit! At another meeting, our three-year-old daughter spilled water on his trousers. We were rather mortified, but he reassured us that he had just had his "second baptism."

John was the founder of the London Institute for Contemporary Christianity (LICC), which met at a church on Vere Street. The mission of the LICC

¹ Particularly informative are Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry; A Biography of the Later Years* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2001); and Christopher Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple: Recollections of John Stott's Life and Ministry* (Leicester: Inter-Varsity Press, 2011).

² John has written a captivating book on birds: John Stott, *The Birds Our Teacher* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2001). All the photos are his. He never went far without his binoculars and a camera. Of the 9,000 species, he says he has seen 2,500.

was to encourage laypersons in their faith. Ed Clowney was a regular. One year I was invited there to speak on rock ‘n’ roll music. This required a number of planning meetings. Long discussions on the nature of art and the place of music were held. In attendance were my good friends Nigel Goodwin, Steve Turner, and Tim Dean. We went around and around, and John was looking less and less patient with these learned chatterboxes. The day came and I gave my lecture on rock. It was not life changing. John said I was “diffident” (a polite way of saying *boring?*). One redeeming factor: Tim took me out to a pub and proposed a volume on music for SPCK. *Taking Note of Music* was my first book-length publication.³

Perhaps my most memorable meeting with John was in Africa. I was teaching in Bangui, Central African Republic (*Centrafrique*) at an Evangelical seminary there. By coincidence John spent a few days with us. Having grown up in France, I was privileged to translate his addresses into French. With a twinkle he whispered to me not to try and correct him—which I would never dream of—he had taken a first in French at Cambridge.

We lodged together in the guest house. I got to watch his routines, which included an early rise for devotions (“quiet time,” as it was called). One morning he suggested we go looking for birds. Joe Paluku, the dean, drove us to a remote place to look for some exotic feathered friends. Instead, we were greeted by a formidable sentry who was ostensibly protecting a local radar station. He called us spies and threatened to shoot us with his machine gun. Fortunately, Dean Paluku was a tribal chief and knew how to throw his weight around. After what seemed an interminable argument with this watchman, Joe came to us and said if we left right away, we would not get shot. All we saw that day was a stray egret.

John graced us at Westminster Seminary, where he gave a memorable lecture on ministry based on 2 Corinthians 3 and 4. To Barb’s and my embarrassment, the room was less than half full. We saw students studying in the library or simply walking around outside. To us, it was the opportunity of a lifetime; to them, it was one more chapel speaker.

John was a great advocate of contextualization. We had numerous conversations about music (ethnomusicology was my domain). He put me in touch with Wafeek Wahby, a Christian leader in Alexandria, Egypt. Wafeek and I became fast friends. He sent me a hymnbook in Arabic, an ethnomusicologist’s dream. (His brother Victor treated Francis Schaeffer in his declining years.)

³ Cf. William Edgar, *Taking Note of Music*, Third Way Books (London: SPCK, 1986).

Stott's views were not all predictable. At first, he was a pacifist, though he eventually espoused "just war" theory. Poignantly near the end, John told some of us that he had made a major mistake: choosing celibacy. This was not for want of aspirants. Frances Whitehead, his assistant for 60 years would have made a marvelous life's companion. Did he have a reason? The man who led John to the Lord through the British camps, Eric Nash, never married and rather implied it would be better for men in Christian service to stay single. Several well-known British Evangelicals came under his sway and accordingly remained celibate. He was a promotor of women's ministry (though not ordination to the highest office). He wrestled with "annihilation," the view that suggests unbelievers will not spend eternity in hell but will be destroyed. I am not persuaded, but I do understand the emotional issues. Stott himself is adamant to say he believes in the judgment and is "agnostic" about annihilation and the fate of the unevangelized.⁴

My love for Uncle John is nearly unbounded. While I respect his tenacious Evangelical orthodoxy and his zeal for missions, I most admire his genuine love for people: not a theory but an unmatched practice. I thank the Lord for sending this man into my life. May the church discover more leaders like him.

⁴ For an articulate assessment of all this by Stott himself, who is nothing if not nuanced, see John Stott, "Judgement and Hell [1988]," *Truth According to Scripture*, <https://www.truthaccordingtoscripture.com/documents/death/judgement-hell.php#.Yn0vsWDMJfU>.