

**John Stott as a Facilitator of Global Theology**  
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In a significant 2006 article, missionary anthropologist Paul Hiebert (1932-2007) argued that a significant aspect of global mission should be mediating the work of global theology. He wrote: “missionaries are bridge persons, culture mediators, who stand between different human worlds . . . global discussions on contextualization need missionaries and global leaders who understand both the gospel and human cultures well and can bridge between them.”<sup>1</sup> Since Hiebert’s article was written, a significant output of literature has come from evangelicals—both western and majority world scholars—on global theology.<sup>2</sup>

In this paper, I will show that John Stott (1921-2011), rector of All Souls, Langham Place, and global ambassador for mission in the Lausanne Movement, anticipated Hiebert’s admonition and, since the 1960s, acted as an early innovator in global theologizing. I will support this claim by focusing on Stott’s work within the Lausanne Movement and from that argue for Stott’s principles for facilitating global theology.

### **Lausanne Movement**

Because of his evangelical conviction and commitment to pursuing biblical truth, as well as his practical catholicity (building bridges with Christians in the broader global church), Stott played a significant role in a number of theological and missiological consultations in the latter

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<sup>1</sup> Paul G. Hiebert, “The Missionary as Mediator of Global Theologizing,” In *Globalizing Theology: Belief and Practice in an Era of World Christianity*, edited by Craig Ott and Harold A. Netland (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2006), 297.

<sup>2</sup> See for example Jeffrey P. Greenman and Gene L. Green, eds. *Global Theology in Evangelical Perspective: Exploring the Contextual Nature of Theology and Mission* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2012); Timothy C. Tennent, *Theology in the Context of World Christianity: How the Global Church is Influencing How we Think About and Discuss Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2007); Allen Yeh and Tite Tiénou, eds. *Majority World Theologies: Theologizing from Africa, Asia, Latin America, and the Ends of the Earth* (Pasadena: William Carey, 2018); Gene L. Green, Stephen T. Pardue, and K.K. Yeo, *Majority World Theology: Christian Doctrine in Global Context* (Downers Grove: IVP Academic, 2020); and Ott and Netland, eds., *Globalizing Theology*.

half of the twentieth century, particularly within the Lausanne Movement. In many of these consultations, Stott served as either the chair or as a member of the drafting committee, which published a statement or working paper. In this role, he facilitated discussion, synthesized thought, and proposed drafts on behalf of the gathered delegation.

### **Lausanne 1974**

The Lausanne International Congress on World Evangelization, which met in Switzerland from July 16-25, 1974, became a turning point in the life of the church, particularly for global evangelicalism. The conference was initiated by Billy Graham because he observed fragmented efforts in evangelical mission during his global ministry travels. His vision for the Lausanne gathering was to “unite all evangelicals in the common task of the total evangelization of the world.”<sup>3</sup> The conference addressed three major areas in world evangelization. First, the participants sought to articulate a theological foundation for mission, which was largely presented in the Lausanne Covenant. In Stott’s plenary address, he strived to clarify the meaning of five terms: “mission,” “evangelism,” “dialogue,” “salvation,” and “conversion.”<sup>4</sup> Second, they discussed the issue of hidden or unreached people groups. Raised initially in a brief paper by Ralph Winter, the people or cultural group focus (as opposed to focusing on countries) became a paradigm shift for mission thinking and practice. Third, the conference seriously discussed holistic mission; the relationship between evangelism and social action.<sup>5</sup>

As chair of the drafting committee that produced the Lausanne Covenant, Stott had the daunting task of leading a diverse group of global evangelical mission theologians in an exercise

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<sup>3</sup> “The Legacy of the Lausanne Movement.” Online: <https://lausanne.org/our-legacy> (accessed September 29, 2022).

<sup>4</sup> Cited in Tim Chester, *Stott on the Christian Life: Between Two Worlds* (Wheaton: Crossway, 2020), 181. See also John Stott, “The Biblical Basis of Evangelism,” In J.D. Douglas, ed., *Let the Earth Hear His Voice: International Congress on World Evangelization, Lausanne, Switzerland* (Minneapolis: WorldWide Publications, 1975), 65-78.

<sup>5</sup> See further “The Legacy of the Lausanne Movement.” Online: <https://lausanne.org/our-legacy> (accessed September 29, 2022).

of discussion, synthesis, and wordsmithing toward a shared document. Following the main aims of the conference, the Lausanne Covenant sought to clarify the biblical meaning of evangelism and mission. In addition to the urgency of reaching the unreached and ministering in Word and deed, the covenant expounded on the missionary nature of God, the authority of Scripture, the person of Christ, the meaning of evangelism, partnership in mission, engaging culture, leadership development, spiritual warfare, the Holy Spirit, and the return of Christ. As papers were presented and feedback was given on these topics by the gathered delegates, Stott and the drafting team literally worked around the clock to have the covenant ready to sign by the end of the nine-day conference. In addition to Stott, the drafting committee was comprised of Leighton Ford (USA), the vice president of Billy Graham's ministry and chair of the Lausanne program committee; Hudson Armerding, president of Wheaton College (USA); J.D. Douglass (Scotland), author and editor of the Lausanne compendium of papers, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*<sup>6</sup>; and Samuel Escobar (Peru), a long-time missionary in Latin America and director of IntersVarsity Canada.

### **Willowbank 1978**

The Willowbank Report was the fruit of a Lausanne study group of thirty-three global church leaders who met for six days in Bermuda in 1978 to discuss the meaning of culture, communicating the gospel across cultures, and equipping the global church in this task. Though Lausanne 1974 had addressed culture and cross-cultural engagement, it was determined that the subject needed further reflection. Unlike the Lausanne Covenant which called for signatories, the Willowbank paper was merely a report that reflected the committee's discussions and process.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See further Douglass, *Let the Earth Hear His Voice*.

<sup>7</sup> See further John Stott, ed., "The Willowbank Report: Consultation on Gospel and Culture." (Lausanne Occasional Paper 2, 1982), 3. Online: <https://lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-2> (accessed September 16, 2022).

Once again, Stott was invited to draft the final document and synthesize the collective thought of the diverse group. Though the Willowbank gathering was much smaller than Lausanne 1974, it was arguably more diverse. The thirty-three delegates hailed from six continents. They included pastors, missionaries, anthropologists, linguists, and theologians. They were academics and practitioners. The group included the likes of African theologians, Kwame Bediako (Ghana), John Mbiti (Kenya), and Tite Tienou (Burkina Faso); Latin American missiologist Orlando Costas (Puerto Rico); American anthropologist, Charles Kraft; British New Testament scholar, I. Howard Marshall; and Asian pastor, James Wong (Singapore).<sup>8</sup> During the week, seventeen papers were presented on culture and revelation, hermeneutics, evangelization, conversion, churches, and ethics.<sup>9</sup>

The Willowbank Report advocated an incarnational engagement with culture, which included an appreciation for how global cultures bear God's image as well as a prophetic critique of sinful aspects of culture from a biblical framework. The report affirmed the Lausanne Covenant's claim that there are no superior cultures, particularly those from the West.<sup>10</sup> The fact that Stott, an English pastor, facilitated this discussion points strongly to his humility in the process.

### **Grand Rapids 1982**

Like the Willowbank, the International Consultation on the Relationship between Evangelism and Social Action was a follow-up conference from Lausanne. A joint consultation with Lausanne and the World Evangelical Fellowship, fifty delegates from twenty-seven countries met in Grand Rapids, Michigan June 19-25, 1982 to pursue clarity on this issue. As

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<sup>8</sup> See further Stott, "Willowbank Report," 48-50.

<sup>9</sup> See further Stott, "Willowbank Report," 47-48.

<sup>10</sup> *Lausanne Covenant* 10.

shown, the conference working paper proposed three possibilities on the relationship of evangelism and social action: that social action could be an outcome of evangelism, a bridge to evangelism, or a partner to evangelism. While all three options were acceptable, the third option seemed to be the most preferable.

Once more, Stott was called upon to facilitate a group of diverse global voices toward consensus on a divisive topic. Papers and responses were given during the week by diverse global theologians and church leaders including David Bosh (South Africa), Peter Kuzmic (Croatia-Slovenia), Peter Beyerhaus (Germany), Tite Tienu (Burkina Faso), and Rene Padilla (Ecuador/Argentina). Along with Stott, the drafting committee was comprised of Gottfried Osei-Mensah (Ghana), Bong Rin Ro (Taiwan), David Wells (Zimbabwe, USA), and Samuel Olson (Venezuela).

The Grand Rapids consultation was remarkable for at least a few reasons. First, the delegates, speakers, and conference drafting team were far more diverse than Lausanne 1974. Second, the program chairs, Osei-Mensah and Ro, were African and Asian. Third, the conference invited a true debate with theologians on different ends of the spectrum. Beyerhaus held firmly that evangelism was the essence of mission, while Padilla advocated holistic mission. That constructive theology of mission and practice resulted was a testament to Stott's ability to facilitate and synthesize honest discussion.

### **Stott's Principles of Facilitating Global Theology**

In these consultations, Stott clearly had a gift for bringing diverse people together for constructive theological discussion. He was a peacemaker who built bridges across theological and cultural lines toward finding consensus in important areas of mission theology. In addition to being a gifted expositor and preacher, Stott was an excellent administrator. Fusing these together,

he became an administrative theologian in the task of doing global theology.<sup>11</sup> To summarize his work, I assert that four principles guided his approach.

## Friendship

Stott was effective in facilitating global theology because he approached global church leaders with authentic friendship. Going back to his early travels and university missions in South and East Africa in the late 1950s and early 1960s, Stott forged lifelong relationships with university students who would become leaders in the African church, including Archbishop Janani Luwum (Uganda), Archbishop David Gitari (Kenya), and Bishop Misaeri Kauma (Uganda).<sup>12</sup>

Numerous global theologians affirmed Stott's posture of friendship. Ajith Fernando, who went on to become the leader of Youth for Christ in his home country of Sri Lanka, first met Stott when he was a student at Fuller Theological Seminary. Stott, who already knew Fernando's parents, greeted him with warmth and kindness and quickly became his "Uncle John."<sup>13</sup> Samuel Escobar, described his friendship with Stott as walking with "a servant of God, from whose life and thought I have learned so much."<sup>14</sup>

Rene Padilla described Stott as the "person that best embodies . . . the Pauline invitation, 'Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.'"<sup>15</sup> The two first met in 1959. When they met again five years later, Stott greeted Padilla by name. Stott's remarkable ability to remember people and

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<sup>11</sup> See further Timothy Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry* (Downers Grove: Intervarsity Press, 2001), 213-214; Alister Chapman, *Godly Ambition: John Stott and the Evangelical Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 146.

<sup>12</sup> See further Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry*, 106-110; also Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: The Making of a Leader*, 409-419.

<sup>13</sup> Ajith Fernando, "Mentor and Model to Emerging Younger Leaders," in Christopher J.H. Wright, ed., *Portraits of a Radical Disciple: Recollections of John Stott's Life and Ministry* (Downers Grove: IVP Books, 2011), 127-128.

<sup>14</sup> Samuel Escobar, "On the Road with John Stott," in Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple*, 140.

<sup>15</sup> Rene Padilla, "Jesus Told Us to Wash One Another's Feet . . . I Can Clean Your Shoes," in Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple*, 141.

names only endeared people to him. Commenting further on Stott's humility, Padilla recalled an instance when Stott was visiting him in Argentina and the two had to walk down a muddy road to get to their accommodations. The next day, Padilla discovered Stott cleaning and polishing Padilla's shoes. When he protested, Stott said, "My dear Rene . . . Jesus told us to wash one another's feet . . . I can clean your shoes."<sup>16</sup>

Michael Nazir-Ali, an Anglican bishop in Pakistan and Britain as well as a mission leader and educator, also remembered Stott's friendship. When Nazir-Ali was first appointed bishop, Stott wrote him a long letter with encouragement and advice. During painful times, including Nazir-Ali's flight from his homeland because of persecution, Stott was there to support him.<sup>17</sup>

While Stott built friendships with these leaders in global consultations like Lausanne, he also visited them in their home countries. He stayed in their homes and ministered with them in their contexts. He probably cultivated more friendship and trust through dragging these friends on bird-watching expeditions than at any theological gathering.

Stott also seemed convinced that authentic friendship and understanding was key to building consensus in theological discussions. Reflecting fondly on what he called the "spirit of Lausanne"—the environment that made the working out of the Lausanne Covenant possible—Stott described this atmosphere as one of "welcome humility."<sup>18</sup> As questions and even disagreements remained after Lausanne 1974, Stott emphasized the need for proximity and even friendship amid theological dialogue: "It is only when we meet face to face, and struggle to hear

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<sup>16</sup> Padilla, "Jesus Told Us to Wash One Another's Feet . . . I Can Clean Your Shoes," in Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple*, 143.

<sup>17</sup> See further Michael Nazir-Ali, "God's Bright-Tied Angel of Protection," in Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple*, 147-149.

<sup>18</sup> John Stott, "The Significance of Lausanne," *International Review of Mission* 62, no. 255 (1975): 288.

and understand each other, that our typecast images of one another (developed in separation) are modified, and we grow in mutual respect and shared conviction.”<sup>19</sup>

## Listening

For Stott, authentic friendship went hand-in-hand with listening. While he advocated the habit of double listening between Scripture and culture, a similar value seemed at work as he listened to evangelical Christians from different cultural backgrounds reflecting on the meaning of Scripture and mission.

In 1974 and 1975, before and after Lausanne, Stott spent a fair amount of time traveling and ministering in Latin America. It also served as something of a listening tour as he observed firsthand the contexts in which Escobar, Padilla, and others did their theology. Escobar observed that Stott’s global travel “sensitized him to the reality of a multicultural church.”<sup>20</sup> While visiting Escobar before Lausanne, the two men talked about their preparation for their plenary messages at the conference. Escobar remarked, “I was touched by John’s openness to hear all voices and to respect different positions.”<sup>21</sup>

During Lausanne, Stott was especially attentive to the radical discipleship group—an ad hoc group that began meeting during the consultation because they did not feel enough attention was being given to social action. During their meetings, they drafted a brief statement that they wanted to be included in the Lausanne Covenant. Though the conference was ending, and it was too late to work the statement in, Stott went and listened to them for an hour, and proposed that the statement become an addendum to the covenant.<sup>22</sup> And he volunteered to be the first to sign

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<sup>19</sup> Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry*, 227; see also Stott, “The Significance of Lausanne,” 293.

<sup>20</sup> Escobar, “On the Road with John Stott,” in Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple*, 138.

<sup>21</sup> Escobar, “On the Road with John Stott,” in Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple*, 136-137.

<sup>22</sup> “Theology and Implication of Radical Discipleship.” Online: <https://lausanne.org/wp-content/uploads/2007/06/1294.pdf> (accessed October 2, 2022).



it.<sup>23</sup> This irenic proposal was acceptable to the group, and the radical discipleship statement was published in the conference documents. Summarizing the significance of Stott's listening posture, one Lausanne leader remarked: "[the radical discipleship group] would have been marginalized but John met with them, stayed with them, they felt he was on their side, and he was ready to listen."<sup>24</sup>

### **Changing Power Structures**

In addition to building friendships with majority-world theologians and listening to their thoughts, Stott also effectively altered the power structures within the Lausanne Movement to include more global voices. Though the Lausanne 1974 attendees were diverse, and the plenary speakers included Asians, Africans, and Latin Americans, the program was still under Leighton Ford's direction and the final draft of the Lausanne Covenant was ultimately the responsibility of Stott and Ford. Of course, the conference was largely funded by Billy Graham's ministry.

After Lausanne 1974, a continuation committee was appointed to continue discussing some of the big themes. They met in Mexico City in 1975. Though Escobar and Padilla had given plenaries at Lausanne, they were not invited to be part of the committee. Further, under pressure from American theologians and church leaders, at the Mexico City meeting, Graham emphasized the place of evangelism in mission and effectively diminished social action and responsibility. In a courageous and peaceful response talk, Stott challenged Graham's position and reminded the conference of the integral relationship of evangelism and social action articulated in paragraph 5 of the Lausanne Covenant. Stott also met privately with Graham to talk through the matter. In the end, Graham amended his remarks and followed Stott's lead on the balance between evangelism and social action. Also, Graham refused to accept the role of

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<sup>23</sup> See further Chester, *Stott on the Christian Life*, 199-200.

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry*, 229.

president of the Lausanne Movement, which opened the door for more leadership and input from global voices.<sup>25</sup>

Padilla recognized that his 1974 plenary talk on evangelism and social action was met with suspicion and rejection by some delegates, especially North Americans. However, his thoughts made it into the Lausanne Covenant because of Stott's influence.<sup>26</sup> And when the continuation committee delegated the controversial questions to the Lausanne theology working groups that would meet in Bermuda, London, and Grand Rapids, Stott made sure that Padilla was invited to each event and that he fully contributed to the discussion. Ajith Fernando observed, "Like Barnabas, Stott used his moral authority and esteem as an acknowledged leader to sponsor and encourage younger creative thinkers."<sup>27</sup> Alistair Chapman asserted, "His nationality was a real asset for his leadership in Lausanne. His Englishness made him an ideal broker between evangelicals from the United States and those from the Third World."<sup>28</sup> Fernando and Chapman both seem correct. Because of his convictions that majority-world leaders like Rene Padilla ought to be heard on the global evangelical stage, Stott used his leverage as a western church leader to change the power structures within Lausanne and within global evangelicalism.

### **Learning from Global South Theologians**

As Stott listened to majority-world theologians and even spent time in their contexts of ministry, he allowed his theological views to be shaped by theirs.<sup>29</sup> Though Stott was already leaning toward the integration of evangelism and social action between 1966 and 1974, it seems that his listening tour in Latin America before Lausanne and the discussions during Lausanne

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<sup>25</sup> See further Chapman, *Godly Ambition*, 142-143; also Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry*, 220-224.

<sup>26</sup> See further Padilla, "Jesus Told Us to Wash One Another's Feet . . . I Can Clean Your Shoes," in Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple*, 142-143.

<sup>27</sup> Fernando, "Mentor and Model to Emerging Younger Leaders," in Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple*, 127-128.

<sup>28</sup> Chapman, *Godly Ambition*, 148.

<sup>29</sup> See further Dudley-Smith, *John Stott: A Global Ministry*, 219.

solidified his convictions. His talk at the 1975 Mexico City gathering, his lectures at Wycliffe Hall that became the book, *Christian Mission in the Modern World*, and his work at the 1982 Grand Rapids consultation all seem to affirm to this.

Though Stott was an able pastor-theologian, it appears that his theology of mission was further fortified by the theological work of others. For example, in the Lausanne Covenant, Stott's commentary on the covenant, and in the Grand Rapids paper, he asserts that a proper understanding of the Kingdom of God provides warrant for holistic mission.<sup>30</sup> Here he seems to build on Padilla's rich exposition of the Kingdom at Lausanne and in other publications.<sup>31</sup>

Similarly, Stott had asserted that western Christians ought to learn from majority world believers about simple living. While he observed poverty and simplicity in his global travels, his thought also appears shaped by Padilla here as well. In a paper that Padilla gave at the 1980 Consultation of Simple Lifestyle, he did some excellent exegesis on the poverty of Christ in the Gospels, in the Beatitudes, and on the practice of the early church in Acts.<sup>32</sup> These theological reflections seem to further shape Stott's thought and practice.

In a reflective article following Lausanne, Stott recognized that on the matter of evangelism and social action, Escobar had "set the cat among the pigeons."<sup>33</sup> Escobar had spoken prophetically to the conference and with Padilla had challenged the global church, particularly those in the West, to read Scripture again and cultivate a more holistic understanding of mission. Stott seems to have taken this as seriously as anyone.

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<sup>30</sup> See further *Lausanne Covenant* 5; Stott, "Lausanne Covenant: An Exposition and Commentary," 28; and Stott, ed., "Evangelism and Social Responsibility: An Evangelical Commitment" (Lausanne Occasional Paper 21, 1982), 22-28. Online: <https://lausanne.org/content/lop/lop-21> (accessed August 18, 2022).

<sup>31</sup> See further Padilla's chapters, "What is the Gospel?" and "The Mission of the Church in Light of the Kingdom of God" in C. Rene Padilla, *Mission Between the Times: Essays on the Kingdom* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985), 62-84, 186-199; also Stott, *Issues Facing Christians Today*, 177-178.

<sup>32</sup> See Padilla, "New Testament Perspectives on Simple Lifestyle," in Padilla, *Mission Between the Times*, 170-185.

<sup>33</sup> Stott, "Significance of Lausanne," 289.

## Conclusion

John Stott possessed a keen theological mind and the gift of administration. In the work of facilitating global theology, he ably exercised both gifts. Peter Kuzmic observed: “It was at Lausanne that the world recognized John Stott as . . . the chief engineer of evangelical unity in theological essentials and holistic mission.”<sup>34</sup> Stott walked with groups of diverse global scholars, synthesized thought, and encouraged reasonable compromise. He was adept at this task because he had already built friendships and trust, particularly with majority-world theologians. He listened well in the task of theology and, at times, allowed his views to change and be shaped by other global theologians.

Not unlike Archbishop Geoffrey Fisher (1887-1972), who changed the power structures in the twentieth-century global Anglican communion to empower national bishops and churches,<sup>35</sup> Stott worked to change the power structures within global evangelicalism. During his leadership of Lausanne and other networks between 1967 and 1989, he increasingly listened to and involved younger and more diverse global leaders in the conversation.

Though Stott led global evangelicals toward consensus on holistic mission, simplicity, and emphasizing cultural engagement in Christian mission, these theological matters were by no means fully resolved at Lausanne, Bermuda, or Grand Rapids. Following the Willowbank consultation, African theologian Kwame Bediako raised concerns that the gathering still lacked sufficient global voices, that there was suspicion about the orthodoxy of younger church movements in the world, and that mission was still being defined largely in western terms.<sup>36</sup> As

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<sup>34</sup> Kuzmic, “A Modern Day Church Father,” in Wright, *Portraits of a Radical Disciple*, 151.

<sup>35</sup> See further Colin Podmore, “The Development of the Instruments of Communion,” in *The Oxford History of Anglicanism, Volume IV: Global Western Anglicanism, c. 1910-present*, edited by Jeremy Morris (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 283-290.

<sup>36</sup> See further Kwame Bediako, “The Willowbank Consultation January 1978—A Personal Reflection,” *Themelios* 5, no. 2 (January 1980). Online: <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/themelios/article/the-willowbank-consultation-jan-1978-a-personal-reflection/> (accessed October 15, 2022).

the Lausanne Movement prepared for its second international congress in Manilla in 1989, Padilla, Escobar, and others expressed concern that a conviction for mission in Word and deed was waning among evangelicals.<sup>37</sup> Though Stott clearly valued and listened to the global theologians present at these consultations, could it be that at points he was unable to get past his Englishness and western tendencies in his theological method? Even for the most well-intentioned global Christian leader, the process of pursuing global theology was a life-long process with many ebbs and flows.

Finally, Stott's work as a facilitator of global theology was limited to global consultations in which western and majority world theologians and church leaders gathered. To be sure, Stott made sure that global voices were heard in these gatherings and their perspectives shaped documents such as the Lausanne Covenant and later working group publications. While Stott labored to do contextual theology in the twentieth-century British context through his habit of double listening, there is no evidence that he labored alongside global theologians in their own contexts to do local contextual theology. Though his work paved the way toward self-theologizing, Stott did not directly engage in this work.

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<sup>37</sup> See further Robert A. Hunt, "The History of the Lausanne Movement, 1974-2010," *International Bulletin of Missionary Research* 35, no. 2 (April 2011): 81-84.