



# **GRASPING THE NETTLE**

## **NEWSLETTER**

**Autumn/Winter 2022**



## **GRASPING THE NETTLE OF MISSION**

### **Support From GTN**

Mission has always been a priority of the church. Now it is an essential of survival—but then it always has been! Yet, as the candle of Christian witness glows evermore faintly across society, in the face of the winds of secularism, missional outreach has become king.

Fewer than 50% of people in England and Wales identify as Christian. Census data, based on the picture in England and Wales, released nationally on 29th November 2022, demonstrates a huge decrease in the number of people identifying as religious, compared to a decade ago. Scotland is not bucking the trend. The Guardian newspaper has labelled England and Wales minority Christian countries. The CEO of the National Secular Society describes the recent data as *“a watershed moment for the UK not being a majority Christian country”*. But none of this comes as a surprise and, across the land, denominations are formulating strategies and priorities. Might there be a support role for GTN?

Can churches ever realistically aspire to re-filling the empty pews with fresh blood and renewed enthusiasm? Some are already giving reason for optimism—such as Trinity Church in Aberdeen now installed in the recently acquired Aberdeen Exhibition and Convention Centre, vacated by the council in favour of a grander replacement. Trinity can attract up to 1000 people to its Sunday morning services.



But how this be done across the land and what is the agenda? Archbishop of York, Most Rev Stephen Cottrell, is convinced that the same people as have forsaken the pews “*still seek spiritual truth*”.

*Based on experience, GTN is also convinced that a majority of the public is potentially fascinated by the amazing story of how we came to be here and the wonderful phenomena that sustain our existence.* This is far bigger than the narrower question of ‘has science displaced God?’. It raises the big questions of life—including how is such seemingly orchestrated wonder possible without the action of a transcendent mind behind the universe? The alternative appears to be a multitude of lucky breaks way beyond statistical probability. But if a transcendent creator exists, with purposeful intentions for creation, how does that impact answers about the meaning of life?



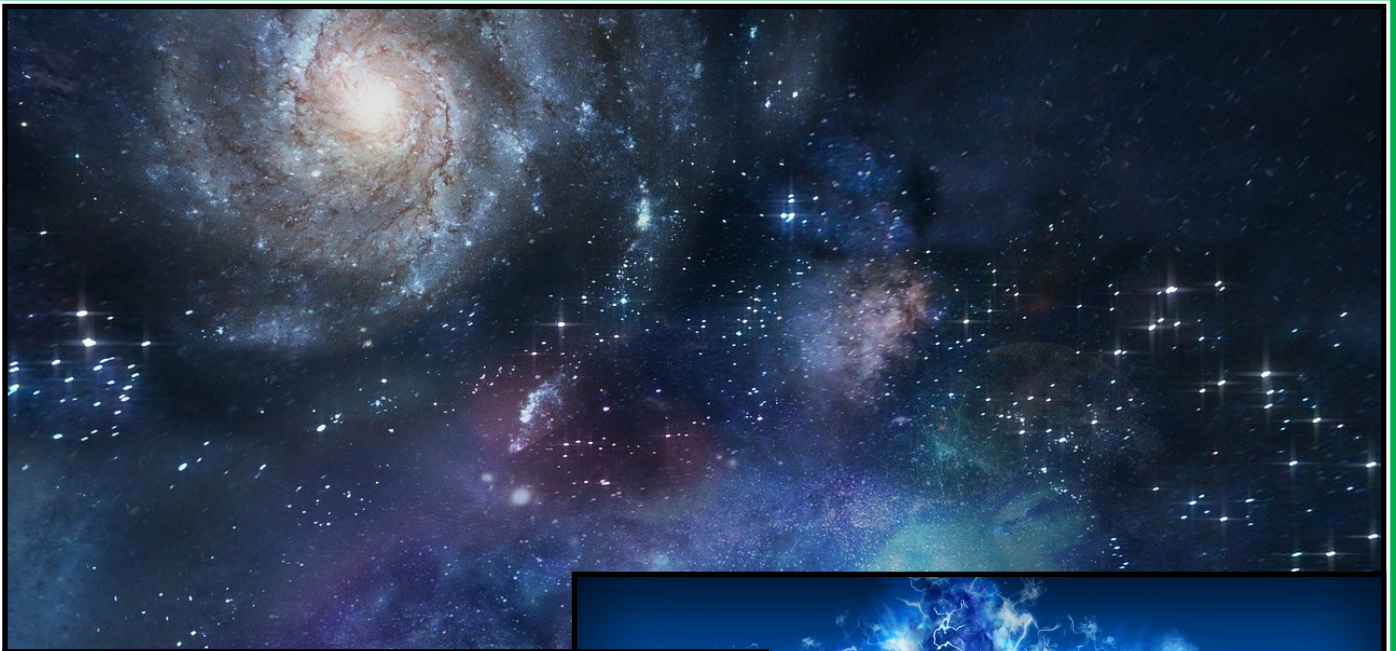
That's the agenda of The God Question resources—

[www.thegodquestion.tv](http://www.thegodquestion.tv)

According to the series Associate Producer Karen Rollins, the three central themes of the programmes probe the big issues that lie at

the heart of why we exist. What brought the cosmos into being and why is it so finely tuned to support life? How can we explain the intricate wonder of life on earth? What is the origin of the human mind and brain and why is the phenomenon of human consciousness beyond convincing explanation?

For many who are dubious about whether or not God exists, these are crucially important starting points in the process of mission.



The God Question themes: Cosmos, Life, Consciousness

A recent meeting of the GTN Steering Board unanimously endorsed the plan to offer GTN support and resources, as part of a mission strategy, to churches of all denominations across Scotland.

Representing the Baptist Union of Scotland, Rev Adam Oellermann confirmed a fresh emphasis, called INCREASE, on mission. Rev Dr Fergus Macdonald, for the Free Church of Scotland, described a reach out initiative into communities where people have “*at best a*



Rev Adam Oellermann



Dr Rose Mary Harley

*tenuous connection with church”.*

Dr Rose Mary Harley confirmed “*The Roman Catholic Church in Scotland faces the same challenges of diminishing active involvement in the life of the Church; fresh initiatives are essential*” . “*In all these contexts GTN resources could be key,*” added Fergus Macdonald.



Rev Dr Fergus Macdonald

For the Scottish Episcopal Church, Rev Gerry Dillon emphasised that although young people represent a crucially important target audience, a priority is to start with *“the de-churched or those who have abandoned the church”*.

GTN Liaison Officer Rev George Lind emphasised that the resources are “confidence-boosting and faith-inspiring” for those already committed to Christian faith.



Rev Gerry Dillon

In this mission-priority context, GTN also recommends the use of the cinematic film *Against The Tide* as a way of setting the scene for discussion about what Christians believe and what evidence there is for the Christian worldview. For more details see

[www.againstthetidemovie.org](http://www.againstthetidemovie.org)



“ ... A MUST-SEE DOCUMENTARY!  
... FASCINATING AND INSIGHTFUL ... ” – The Dove Foundation

“ ... ONE OF THE BEST APOLOGIST DOCUMENTARIES EVER MADE ... ” – Crosswalk.com

#1 TOP REDEMPTIVE FILM OF 2020 – Church Tech Today

Available Now  
DVD, Blu-ray,  
and Streaming

AGAINST *The* TIDE

JOHN LENNOX + KEVIN SORBO

FINDING GOD IN AN AGE OF SCIENCE

In the next months GTN, led by Very Rev Dr Martin Fair, will make fresh approaches to presbyteries and dioceses across Scotland with a view to offering support and resources to facilitate the process of mission.

### SUPPORTING GTN

Thanks to all who support GTN with your participation in events, general promotion of its activities, and not least of all, with your financial support. Donations to GTN can be given at [www.graspinthenettle.org/donate](http://www.graspinthenettle.org/donate).





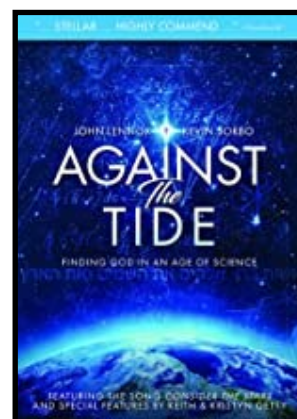
## GIFTS WITH A DIFFERENCE THIS CHRISTMAS FOR YOUR FRIENDS AND FAMILY!

The Exploring the God Question documentary series and Study Guide resources are available at [www.thegodquestion.tv/explore](http://www.thegodquestion.tv/explore) (go to 'store'). Also available with online access.



For the new 'global' series incorporating Far Eastern perspectives, download Science and God: The Search for Meaning and Truth at [www.thegodquestion/global](http://www.thegodquestion/global) and visit the 'store'

Why not gift wrap award-winning Against the Tide and learn more about God and the science question as well as Jesus and the history question. You can make your purchase from [Re-lived.com](http://Re-lived.com) or [Amazon.com](http://Amazon.com). Also available to web-stream at [www.againstthetidemovie.org](http://www.againstthetidemovie.org).



## A WEARY WORLD REJOICES

Rejoicing amidst weariness is a big ask. The burdens and oppressions experienced across the world are very different from 2000 years ago but can equally result in pessimism and despair. But may the hope that Christmas represents and the peace that it offers be yours today and always.

***Happy Christmas from Grasping the Nettle!***



## A View From The Chair The Time is Now

Through its various resources, events and programmes, Grasping the Nettle is in the business of offering a strong case for the reasonableness and reliability of Christian faith - this, at least in part, a response to the often strident voices of those who would seek to undermine such a way of believing.

And so with that underlying aim, we seek to build up Christian people and to encourage those who are intrigued to explore further. But the building up is not an end in itself - rather a means to a greater end.

The 'greater end' in this case is nothing less than the mission to which, from the beginning, Jesus has called his followers - that is '*Go and make disciples of all nations...*'

An important aspect of being ready to play a part in that missional calling is that, individually and together, we be built up in our faith such that we be ready to more confidently share it. The apostle Peter put it this way: '*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks you to give the reason for the hope that you have.*'

There is no question that lack of such 'preparedness' has been thoroughly debilitating in terms of our collective ability to 'give an answer.' Grasping the Nettle longs to address that and, through what we offer, to see more and more Christians able and willing to be alive and active in today's mission field.

Neither is there any question that that 'mission field' begins at our front doorstep. Slowly but surely, churches are awakening to this missional imperative - even those denominations built around the notion that Scotland (as much of the developed world) is a Christian country and why, therefore, would there be a need for mission? This awakening comes not a moment too soon.

Grasping the Nettle is ideally placed to be part of the process whereby together we become equipped for mission.

And the time is now. Right now.

A final thought - one that is always apposite. Peter finishes his '*Always be prepared to give an answer to everyone who asks...*' with this vital clause - that we so do '*with gentleness and respect.*'

Mission in the name of Christ must always be after the likeness of Christ. As we go about our business may it be with gentleness and respect.



Very Rev Dr Martin Fair,  
Chair of GTN

## An Even Wider View From The Chair

Congratulations to GTN chairman Martin Fair on his appointment to lead the national initiative "Pathways to Ministry". In this role Martin will encourage and open doors for more people to consider ministry in all its forms within the life of the Church of Scotland.

## GTN LIAISON OFFICER SERVICES

GTN is delighted to have the services of Rev George Lind. These include speaking with church leaders and congregations about the ways in which GTN helps explore the evidence on which Christian belief is based. Below, George reflects on a recent church visit.



It was an honour to preach recently in Sandyford Henderson Church Glasgow where the topic given was "Hasn't Science Disproved Christianity?" My reply to the question - "It hasn't!" will be no surprise to readers; neither will it surprise them that it took a sermon to flesh out that brief response. This is a congregation which attracts many students, including a substantial Chinese contingent. I had fascinating post-service conversations over coffee with some of them. I now anticipate being put in touch with the congregation's Outreach Worker to students so that I might run an introductory evening on our flagship series *Exploring the God Question*. I also hope to connect with groups of Chinese students and introduce them to our new resource *Science and God: the Search for Meaning*

*and Truth*. (See the summer 2022 newsletter and elsewhere in this issue for more details). I hope that some readers of this newsletter will wish to have me along to their respective churches to talk about our *Exploring the God Question* resources and how these can help their congregations engage with friends who struggle to see how there can be any interface between science and faith. Alternatively, I'd be happy to preach some Sunday as a one-off on the topic "Hasn't Science Disproved Christianity?" Do contact me and I'll be delighted to help.

To arrange a visit to your church, contact

[gklind@talktalk.net](mailto:gklind@talktalk.net) or via

[office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org)



## THE CONTINUING STORY OF GTN ONLINE

For the next in our series of GTN Online sessions we are delighted to welcome Senior Vatican Astronomer Dr Guy Consolmagno presenting

### Questions – Foolish and Profound!

### Selections from the Inbox of the Vatican Astronomer

**Thursday 8th December at 7.30 pm**

Joining us live from Rome, in this session our distinguished guest will share some of the fascinating questions, perplexities - and responses - that populate his inbox from around the world. Naturally, there will be an opportunity to pose questions of our own. Given the time of year, we are already lining up our queries about what to make of the Star of Bethlehem from the perspective of a well-informed age of science!

In 2019 GTN was privileged to have Dr Consolmagno visit Scotland for several days and participate in a range of GTN activities which included an address in partnership with the Presbytery of Glasgow given in Glasgow University's Memorial Chapel, a lecture to the Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow, the annual lecture to the Scottish Institute of Physics, two school conferences, a public information talk at Dundee Science Centre, the keynote address at the GTN National Conference, as well as interviews on BBC Radio Scotland and BBC Television.

The online session on Thursday 8th December is oversubscribed, but you can be placed on the waiting list. Write to [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org)



Post conference at Grove Academy Dundee, students bring their additional questions to the Vatican Astronomer

Dr Consolmagno is interviewed by Martin Geisler on BBC Scotland's 'The Nine'.



## WE SAW HIS STAR IN THE EAST

Setting the Genesis origins narrative beside scientific accounts of how we got here has occupied incalculable amounts of time, discussion and analysis but are there *other* scriptural astronomical references and phenomena that also merit some scrutiny in the light of modern science?



The story of the Magi is an integral part of the nativity season. The star which they followed, first to Jerusalem and then to Bethlehem, has an iconic presence on many a Christmas card design. But is the star a product of folklore or can it be taken seriously from a scientific point of view?

Scripture states the star stood over the place where Jesus was born

An obvious obstacle to any serious enquiry is that the event in question took place two thousand years ago. However, on the positive side, over the centuries, astronomers in Babylon and in China especially, have meticulously recorded events in the night sky; Can such records inform our understanding about what might have drawn the Magi in search of a new-born king?



Following the Star

In 1604, Johannes Kepler observed a Celestial phenomenon that he believed might have been similar to what the Magi saw. A man of Christian faith, he described what he saw as 'like a torch blown by a strong wind'. Now known to be a Supernova, it takes place explosively when a star runs out of fuel. A Supernova can outshine a whole Galaxy and is one of the most impressive lights in the Sky. Could this be a later version of the Star of Bethlehem? Those less persuaded point out that whereas a Supernova can be expected to leave traces of its existence, no such celestial evidence has been found from around the birth of Christ.

## WE SAW HIS STAR IN THE EAST

### Continued

Others have speculated that the star could be an alignment of planets – such as the common coming together of Jupiter and Saturn. Such a conjunction is known to have taken place around 7 BC – the year in which it has been calculated is probably the time of Christ's birth.



Or might the star, in reality, have been a comet? Comets come from the edges of the solar system, and get brighter the closer they travel to the sun. Traditionally, comets have been associated with events on earth.

From the nativity story related by St Matthew, we might infer that the Magi had two distinct sightings of the star: It led them to Jerusalem and re-appeared en route to Bethlehem. Interestingly the trajectory of comets typically takes them behind the sun where they disappear from earthly view before re-appearing. Comets also often have a tail pointing downwards. Could this harmonise with the account that the star appeared to stand over the place where the child lay? In a BBC documentary programme produced in 2015, astronomer Maggie Aderin-Pocock came out in favour of the comet explanation.

Is this idle and distracting speculation or the basis of fruitful enquiry, demonstrating concord in the

relationship between the Bible and science?

In such matters, the advice of theoretical physicist, the late Sir John Polkinghorne, is likely pertinent. He advised that Christians should note such investigations with interest but be careful about making too much of them. He was a star of a different kind!



Bethlehem's Manger Square in 2022

## NEW GLOBAL SERIES BEGINS ITS BROADCAST JOURNEY

While the invitation to make The God Question series available to Chinese speakers was an attractive one, the producers opted instead for a more elaborate and dramatic approach: to replace up to half of the original content with film shot in the Far East, thereby making a series that is more culture-friendly to Chinese speaking viewers.

The series exists in two separate versions: firstly its broadcast format with the series title **Science and the Ultimate Question**; and secondly in a form designed for group and church use—**Science and God: The Search for Meaning and Truth**.

Although the three series themes remain unchanged, a substantial number of interviewees were Professors at Universities in Hong Kong and in mainland China. Addressing the fundamental question ‘Why does anything exist?’ the programmes draw upon Christianity, Buddhism and Daoism as well as science in pursuit of the answers. Made in the English language, the programmes are also available with Chinese subtitles.

Rightly also known as ‘the global series’, the following broadcasters have acquired the production from the series’ distributor, Abacus Media.



**Prava TV:** covering The Balkans/Bosnia-Herzegovina, Croatia, Macedonia, Montenegro, Serbia. **FTV Prima:** Czech Republic. **Foxtel:** Australia and New Zealand. To find out more and access the series visit [www.thegodquestion.tv/global](http://www.thegodquestion.tv/global).

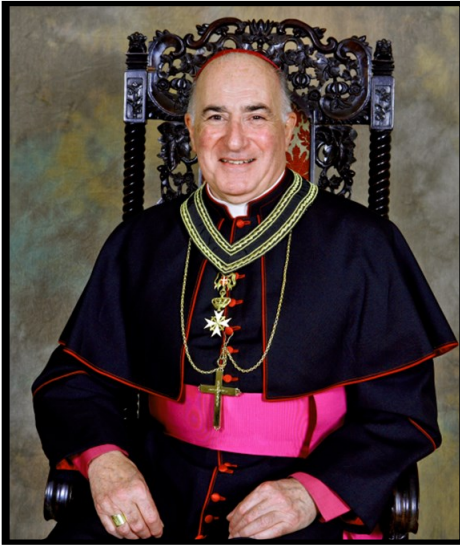


Camera operators at work in Hong Kong



Providing on-location simultaneous translation/transcription of contributor's filmed content

**OBITUARY**  
**ARCHBISHOP MARIO CONTI**  
**1934 – 2022**



It was with sadness that the GTN Steering Board bade farewell to Archbishop Mario Conti, the Board representative of the Roman Catholic Church in Scotland for the last four years. Always fully embracing the agenda for GTN in Scotland, as well as brimming over with creative and practical ideas, Archbishop Conti was highly valued by the Board. His engaging personality and sense of humour endeared him to all. It was especially relevant to the work of GTN that ecumenicism was a priority for the Archbishop.

Born in Elgin, he declared that for as long as he could remember, he had wanted to be a priest. It is reported that he told his primary school teacher he aspired to be Pope. Having studied in Scotland and in Rome, he held degrees in philosophy and theology and was ordained a priest in 1958. Thereafter he became Bishop of Aberdeen in 1977. 25 years later, in 2002, he became successor to Cardinal Thomas Winning as Archbishop of Glasgow. He served for 10 years. An international figure of high standing in the Catholic Church, he leaves not only a vacant space but an important legacy. Archbishop Conti died peacefully in Queen Elizabeth University Hospital, on 8<sup>th</sup> November, after a short illness.

Grasping the Nettle pays tribute to him and expresses our deep gratitude for the treasured relationship we were able to have with him.



## WHAT DO *YOU* THINK?

GTN welcomes feedback and comments on any aspect of our work—including the newsletters. We would also like to invite responses to our lead article Grasping the Nettle of Mission. How do you think GTN can help?

Please send your thoughts to us at [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org)

**MAY MORRIS**  
**1950—2022**

*With sadness but also with thanksgiving, GTN's Liaison Officer, George Lind, reflects on the loss of May Morris, wife of GTN's Director of Programmes.*

After a year-long battle with cancer, May Morris, a most valued partner in the GTN support team, died peacefully at home on the 26<sup>th</sup> August. Her memorable Service of Thanksgiving, held in Motherwell, was conducted in a church which was packed to capacity, as was its overflow hall. GTN friends and associates from many different countries were able to access the service via the live-stream facility.

The value, influence and impact of May's contribution to GTN cannot be overstated. Her innate kindness, grace and thoughtfulness whether at public events or while hosting meetings in the happy and hospitable home she shared with Iain endeared her to all who had the privilege of knowing her. May was in her own right a valued director of Kharis Productions Ltd, the independent film and television company which produced our flagship series "Exploring the God Question". May's quiet, consistent and convinced faith in Christ pulsed through every aspect of her well-lived life, be it in the context of family, church, business or community. May faced her struggle with cancer with courage and with much more concern for the well-being of her family than over the pain, which her illness increasingly imposed. It was most fitting that the main address at her Service of Thanksgiving was given by Prof. John Lennox – a great friend of the Morris family and indeed of the GTN "family". Prof. Lennox's words of comfort and hope were based on Jesus' promise of resurrection and reunion. They were delivered with both tenderness and power. We give thanks, not only for May, but for the Christian conviction about the reality of the resurrection which assures us that death is not the end, but a transition to eternal life.

