



# GRASPING THE NETTLE

## AUTUMN NEWSLETTER 2017

### GRASPING THE NETTLE IN 'WHAT A WONDER-FULL WORLD'!



The recent 'What A Wonder-Full World' event in Lanarkshire

Yes the spelling of 'Wonder-Full' is deliberate. It reflects the astonishing circumstance in which we live, not just on planet earth but in a universe, itself, full of wonder.

'What A Wonder-Full World' is the generic name given to a GTN evening of music, conversation with scientists, drama and film, all of it combining to present a picture of what science reveals about who, what and where we are. It might be described as a GTN 'starter experience'.

The most recent event was held in Dalziel St Andrews Parish Church, Motherwell, as an initiative of churches throughout Lanarkshire. The Minister of the host church, Rev Derek Hughes, said

*"As a former science teacher it is thrilling to be involved in using science as a way of seeing the work of the creator".*



Neil MacLennan, Event Technical Co-ordinator in a last minute check on the programme running order

Rev John MacKinnon of Calderwood Baptist Church, East Kilbride, added *"Far from science threatening our belief in the creator, the evidence points in the other direction. The heavens show His handiwork! That is exactly what this event demonstrates and at the same time raises the question about why our existence is so wonderful. We recognise in this the hand of God; others are invited to see that for themselves".*





The music ensemble Brats and Callets presented a series of musical classics varying from What A Wonderful World to Thank You For The Music



Drama players (L-R) Sandra Craig, Bill Craig and Mhairi MacLean presented two specially written vignettes called 'Cosmic Cut' (set in a hairdressers) and 'On Track' (in railway carriage)

Structured around five questions, the evening interwove the music from vocal ensemble Brats and Callets and Alasdair Morris, conversation with Drs Neil Ritchie and Sarah Lane Ritchie (no relation), specially written drama and film excerpts from The God Question series. The evening was hosted by Iain Morris, series producer.

The evening presented an ideal opportunity for church and community to come together, not only for entertainment but, in a variety of media, to ponder the big questions:

**Where Are We? How Did We Get Here? What Are We? Who Are We? Are We Alone?**



Tenor vocalist Alasdair Morris sang music of the cosmos



Conversations with Dr Sarah Lane Ritchie—from the University of Edinburgh—revealed wonders of mind and brain and with Dr Neil Ritchie—University of Glasgow- who spoke of the wonders of the human body and his work on immunology in particular

**The evening was not an end in itself** but opened the way to promote the whole Grasping the Nettle initiative which of course centrally includes opportunities for '*Exploring the God Question*' studies. Some local churches advertised sessions taking place in the Autumn and some members of the audience committed to attending. Rev Donald Lawrie, Minister of Hamilton South Parish Church praised the event for the way in which it attracted many from outside the Christian community "*I know of some who entered the doors with an atheist mind-set*" he said. "*There was much to challenge those assumptions*".

Interest in staging a 'What A Wonder-Full World' event is emerging from other parts of the country. If you would like to find out about possibilities in your area please contact [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org).

What A Wonder-Full World photographs courtesy of Stephen Leckie



## GRASPING THE NETTLE CROSSES THE BRIDGE TO SKYE

During the last weekend in August the seeds of Grasping the Nettle were planted on the island of Skye.



GTN crosses the bridge to Skye

Held in a Kyleakin hotel there was a whole day conference devoted to learning about *Exploring the God Question* and how it can be used effectively within the wider *Grasping the Nettle* strategy. In the rare circumstances of stunning weekend weather, attendees came from the island as well as the nearby mainland area of Lochalsh and represented the Church of Scotland and the Free Church of Scotland. The vast majority left with God Question resources for use in their local communities.

Increasingly, churches wishing to make connections outside of church circles in the locality are seeing the value of holding a 'What A Wonder-Full World' event—with opportunities to follow for Exploring the God Question—and already leaders in Skye are drawing up plans for such an event early in 2018. Minister of



The Skye conference was held in the village of Kyleakin

Broadford Church of Scotland, Rory MacLeod, said *"Our plan is to familiarise ourselves with The God Question resources during the remainder of 2017 and follow this with a Spring event for the whole community. Thereafter we hope to interest members of*



Host hotel

*the audience subsequently to Explore the God Question with us."*

GTN Chairman, Very Rev Dr John Chalmers, commented *"We are delighted by how we see Grasping the Nettle spread across the country. The strategy to raise the profile of the Church across Scotland can be most effective through the engagement of communities one after another"*.

To invite a speaker to your area to present on Grasping the Nettle with The God Question please contact [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org).

## AND NEXT FOR GTN...

### GRASPING THE NETTLE WITH THE GOD QUESTION PRESENTATION: PERTH PRESBYTERY

The next conference presentation will be for the Presbytery of Perth and will take place in North Church, Mill Street on Saturday 9th September at 10am.

## CALLING ALL CHURCH STUDY GROUPS



Equip and encourage your church group in the exciting issues relating to science and God through the Exploring the God Question resources. To acquire them visit [www.thegodquestion.tv/explore](http://www.thegodquestion.tv/explore) and select 'store'. Benefit from a special 25% GTN discount by entering code GTNSCO25 at the checkout.

## EXPLORING THE GOD QUESTION WITH STUDENTS

In what was a very 'chance' conversation with the Sociology of Religion lecturer at our local college (Dundee & Angus) I mentioned our congregation runs the '*Exploring the God Question*' course. She was immediately interested and within minutes we had agreed that I would run a special edition of the course in the college!

Without a shadow of doubt, it proved to be the best experience of the course that I've yet had. Of the many students who attended, none had any background in church, none would have described themselves as 'Christian' and several were ardent in their atheism. Having run the course for largely 'sympathetic' audiences, this was my first opportunity to share it with those who weren't pre-disposed to agree!

Without exception, the students got fully involved with the programmes and with the discussions that followed. They pressed me hard on almost every subject and the debate was never anything less than robust! Interestingly, though the course focusses on the relationship between science and religion, our conversations moved beyond that into almost every aspect of faith and life.

In 25 years of parish ministry, I've rarely if ever had such a wonderful opportunity to engage with a group of young people in this kind of sustained way. At the end of the course, they took me to the pub and we continued our discussions over a refreshment. The lecturer wanted my assurance that I would run the course again with the next batch of students! There's no question that the quality of '*The God Question*' resources was the key to success and I look forward to using it in this and other ways in the coming months and years.

*Rev Dr Martin Fair is Minister of St Andrews Parish Church, Arbroath and a member of the GTN Steering Board.*



Rev Dr Martin Fair reflects on his GTN experience with students

## REACHING OUR LEADERS OF TOMORROW ON THE CAMPUS TODAY



*Liam Fraser's recently acquired doctorate focussed on atheist beliefs. He is now Campus Minister at the University of Edinburgh. He is also a member of the GTN Council of Advisers.*

Universities are the training grounds of the leaders of tomorrow. What students learn in University will not only impact them personally, but will impact the world in which all of us live.

That is why we at Edinburgh University Campus Ministry (EUCAM) are identifying with Grasping the Nettle (GTN) and using its central resource. *The God Question* series - the best material available for *consciousness-raising* among students, of making them aware that the horizons of their world may be much wider than they had possibly dreamed, and that faith – rather than being the refuge of the gullible or weak – has a depth and rationality that they could scarcely have believed.

While it would be possible for us to simply screen *The God Question* to a small group of Christian students, we are not satisfied with that. We want enquiring people from *all* religious and non-religious backgrounds to be presented with the evidence, and reach their own conclusions about the existence of a Creator, and the rationality of the Christian faith. That is why we are planning a major series of events next semester, bringing together students from both the University's major faith groups and from its major science societies to view *The God Question* series, and engage in debate with one another.

I look forward to reporting on these events in a future edition of this newsletter.

## MAKING PEACE IN THEOLOGICAL WARS

WHY DO CHRISTIANS ARGUE SO MUCH WITH EACH OTHER ABOUT WHAT THE BIBLE MEANS? Whether it is the role of women, differing sexualities, divorce and remarriage, wealth and poverty, the order of creation – Christians seem unable to agree how to understand biblical texts which refer to big issues in our lives. Just getting started talking with one another can prove difficult. But here's an opportunity to approach it from a different angle!



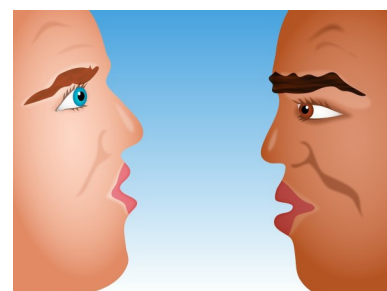
*In teaching classes of theology students over many years, Martin Scott developed a course method on **Ways of Reading the Bible** with a 2-hour session that proved both innovative and effective. Participants always included men and women and also spanned a reasonable spectrum of theological outlook. In this article Martin records his experience, one that could prove of great value as, through Grasping the Nettle, perspectives, ideas and beliefs, are shared from across Christian denominations.*

Rev Dr Martin Scott is Secretary to the Council of Assembly at the Church of Scotland and a member of the GTN Steering Board

### The Rules of Engagement

Ground rules are established at the outset – treat *each other with respect; make your point clearly, but do not enter an argument; if you do not want to speak on a particular issue, just make that clear and you won't be pressed*. Despite being a serious exercise, it is also OK for it to be fun!

In response to a theological statement or Biblical text, participants are asked to stand on a spectrum in a large room – one end represents “totally agree”; the other is “totally disagree”. Each person is free to stand anywhere in the room. The position taken represents their response as the leader reads aloud texts from the Bible. Only the text to be considered is read out – no wider context; no explanation. People arrange themselves around the room. It is amazing how differently people hear the texts and respond to them. Sometimes, almost everyone is at one or other end of the room, but often people cover a considerable spread. For example: “*Beloved, let us love one another, because love is from God; everyone who loves is born of God and knows God*” (1 John 4:7). One might think that is very straightforward, but I have never experienced a session where everyone started off at one end of the room! The texts become increasingly more challenging as the exercise proceeds.



Is it true that Christians can really be confrontational about Biblical interpretation?

### Saying Why!

The leader invites people to say something about why they are standing where they are. Because participants cannot *argue* about what others say, but only explain what they think, people listen to different views and then have to think about them. Throughout the exercise, people are encouraged to move physically during the discussion to another part of the room as their views are influenced by what others think. Gradually, over the two-hour period, people begin to share more deeply and to move more often as they gain confidence in talking together. The outcome of the event has always been that people gain a greater realisation of the depth and breadth of the meaning of scripture for the variety of situations in which we live out our faith. People do not ever all agree, but they do learn more to listen and respect the ways in which others understand their faith.

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If you have any questions or responses to the above please send them to [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org) from where further discussion will be encouraged.



## THE GOD QUESTION GOES TO LOS ALAMOS



In the last edition of the GTN newsletter we reported on the positive response given to The God Question series at CERN and also at the World Council of Churches. Now the series has reached the most famous research laboratory in the United States.

Los Alamos National Laboratory (LANL) is a United States Department of Energy national laboratory initially organized during World War II for the design of nuclear weapons as part of the Manhattan Project under the director J. Robert Oppenheimer. Today

with a budget of about US\$2.2 billion and approximately 10,000 personnel it conducts multidisciplinary research in fields such as national security, space exploration, nuclear fusion, renewable energy, medicine, nanotechnology, and supercomputing. Many visiting scientists are attracted from around the world.

The Chairman of the Faith and Science Forum, Dr Nelson Hoffman, commented *"Your series on 'The God Question' is a really remarkable production - such high quality, and such a broad range of thinkers, of the highest stature! Thank you very much for bringing it to our attention. Our board of directors has given it a very positive response"*.



Statue of Oppenheimer and General Groves

## A FIRST FOR SANCTUARY FIRST



Week one's presentation of Exploring the God Question on Sanctuary First online with Very Rev Albert Bogle and Neil MacLennan of Sanctus Media.

Late August and September is seeing the first known online study of *Exploring the God Question*. Sanctuary First is, primarily, an online worshipping community and as one of its first steps in engaging with small groups has begun working with 'Exploring the God Question' material online. Each week, after watching the programme online, the presenters meet with a special guest, either in person or via Skype and explore together (using the Study Guide) the topics in each programme. Online participants can also contribute via live chat with their own points, or pose a questions to the special guest. Discussions are led by Sanctuary First Minister, Very Rev Albert Bogle, supported by Neil MacLennan.

### The Benefits of Internet Connectivity

Commenting on the experience so far, Neil said, *"Folks are watching in from home, and from all over Scotland and are really engaging with the material. Bringing in our special guests over Skype means that we can reach out to knowledgeable and experienced contributors who might never have been able to travel to our geographic location so easily"*.

For further information see [www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/tgq](http://www.sanctuaryfirst.org.uk/tgq)

## GRASPING THE NETTLE IN HONG KONG WITH THE GOD QUESTION

*"Grasping the Nettle needs to have its sights set not just on Scotland but on the world".* This is the vision of Professor John Spence, Chairman of Search for Truth Charitable Trust that presently underwrites the cost of GTN.

The writer of John's Gospel makes it clear that God's spirit is like the wind and its location and impact cannot be predicted. So what about the unlikely (humanly speaking) circumstance in which GTN becomes established in Hong Kong?

But that is closer to being a reality than might be anticipated back in Scotland. The fertile soil for the seeding and growth of GTN in the Far East comes from progress being made in plans for the production of The God Question series for a Chinese audience.

*"This is not just a dubbed version in Mandarin of the existing God Question series,"* said Karen Rollins, Associate Producer of the series. *"This series, while drawing on a substantial amount of Western material already used in the existing programmes, will have a lot of brand new content provided by Chinese contributors and will be conspicuously set in a Far Eastern context."* That context includes a sensitive focus on how Confucianism, Buddhism and Taoism have contributed to Chinese spiritual understanding.



Hong Kong Island from Kowloon



Ching Ming festival, Hong Kong

Some of the filming has already taken place. It includes a phenomenal opportunity which opened up for a film crew to capture the drama of the Ching Ming festival in which families visit the graves of their ancestors. Nothing unusual in that. It is what follows that makes the Ching Ming festival distinct.

Descendants attempt to send material goods into the after-life for the benefit of their ancestors. Everything from paper money to children's toys and pairs of shoes are purchased from local vendors, crammed into a sack and dispatched to the next world via an incinerator.



Dispatching goods to the ancestors



Purchasing goods for family ancestors

*"Such cultural practices are vitally important in building content for The God Question for a Chinese audience,"* commented Producer Iain Morris. *"Essentially the series focusses on what can be evidentially substantiated in relation to what we believe. We want to lead the viewing audience on a thinking journey about what we might reasonably consider to be true about ultimate reality – and why."*



Already at least two major universities in Hong Kong are gearing up to using *The God Question* material at the centre of academic courses. The Chinese University of Hong Kong proposes to create online material based on the series and offer it as a certificated course widely available in mainland China.



University of Hong Kong campus

Meantime the University of Hong Kong, very high in world rankings, is focussing on engagement with the local culture on big philosophical questions. The course leader is Sociologist David Palmer. *"This is exactly the kind of balanced approach to the subject the University of Hong Kong values greatly and we are very optimistic about how we can use it to engage the minds of our Chinese culture"*. And that is the essence of Grasping the Nettle: engaging culture. However, what if the term 'Grasping the Nettle' draws a blank in

the local culture? *"I think we need to swap your nettle-grasping for a bull that we grab by the horns,"* suggests David Palmer.

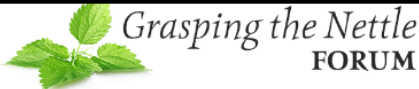
No matter. Bulls or nettles. Either can lead to exploring the big issues and that is the whole point of the exercise.





Looking towards Hong Kong Island

## GETTING TO GRIPS WITH THE BIG ISSUES RELATING TO SCIENCE AND GOD

Although the ultimate aim of GTN is public engagement, there is an obvious need to offer opportunities to the GTN 'family' to encounter and discuss big issues on the science and God agenda. How the science of evolution impacts theological understanding is a matter of deep importance, as is what light neurobiology can shed on our understanding of the cerebral processes through which human beings may relate to God.



Welcome to the conversation lynsey!  
 You have posted 0 times  
 Your last visit: one month ago  
 You are here: [Forum Home](#)  
 Back to: [main website forum area](#).

Forum	Topics	Posts
<b>Brain, Mind and Matters of the Soul</b>  <b>Discussion Questions</b> Thoughts for discussion prompted by the chairperson.	5	41
<b>Darwin, DNA and Divinity</b>  <b>Discussion Questions</b> Thoughts for discussion prompted by the chairperson.	6	31

Screenshot from a GTN Forum page

We are delighted therefore to have a now well-established GTN FORUM, accessed via [www.graspingthenettle.org](http://www.graspingthenettle.org) (Select 'Forum' from the menu and follow the log-in instructions). Discussion on the above topics is well underway. Do tune in and join the discussion, either as observer or participant. We aim to make the Forum a centrally important resource within GTN.

### Interpreting Genesis 1-3

The most recent addition to the Forum is an excellent paper, entitled *What Kind of Literature is Genesis 1-3?* by Rev Dr Fergus Macdonald, a member of the GTN Steering Board. It can be accessed via the Darwin, DNA and Divinity discussion table.



## A NATIONAL EDUCATION CONFERENCE ON THE GOD QUESTION



On 17th May 2018 a joint conference will be held by Christian Values in Education, the Scottish Catholic Education Service and Scripture Union Scotland. The main focus of the conference will be on the educational value and practical use of *Introducing the God Question*, the version of the series specially devised for schools and universities. Dr John Lennox, Emeritus Professor of Mathematics at Green Templeton College, the University of Oxford, will deliver the keynote address. The conference fee includes ITGQ classroom resources.

Director of the Scottish Catholic Education Service, Barbara Coupar, said *"The conference offers a new and exciting opportunity for three organisations in Scotland, concerned with the spiritual welfare of our young people, to work together and we greatly look forward to an event that will promote and facilitate a high quality spiritual and educational experience for pupils in Scottish classrooms."*

### Introducing the God Question in your Local Secondary School

With the new school session in full swing, now might be an ideal time to approach your local Head-teacher or Head of RE to ensure that they know about the new major curriculum resource *Introducing the God Question*. It has been designed for use within RME/RE and has a very close connection to the curriculum for Religious, Moral and Philosophical Studies. Education Secretary John Swinney, MSP, described the series as "An example of the Curriculum for Excellence at its best". Before approaching your local school, please write to [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org) requesting our information sheet *Advice for Talking to Secondary Schools About Introducing the God Question*.



Professor John Lennox will deliver the keynote address at the National Education Conference on The God Question

## GTN SUNDAY



Ministers of the Church of Scotland are familiar with the popular 'Sermons for Sunday' resources. One of the Sundays in February 2018 will be used to highlight issues relating to science and God. It is hoped that churches in other denominations will take this opportunity to use the GTN produced resources for the day and highlight the crucially important topic of science and God. Although the precise date has still to be identified it is likely to be close to the secular celebration of Darwin Day.

## AN APPETITE FOR DINNER?

Regular attenders of GTN dinners in Glasgow might be disappointed to know that to date no dinner has been scheduled this year. *"It was never our intention that the GTN family would go hungry"* said organiser Iain Morris. *"The reality is that the diversity of GTN activities is very time consuming and there was insufficient time to organise a successful dinner in the usual timeframe. Nevertheless plans are afoot for a feast of activity in 2018"*.