

# Grasping the Nettle

## GTN FIVE YEARS ON: LOOKING BACK AND MOVING FORWARD



### Introduction

The date: 5 June 2014. The scene: the currently named Glasgow Hilton Doubletree Hotel. One hundred and eighty dinner guests gather for an event named (without too much forethought) '**Grasping the Nettle**'. The key question was: Are science and religion at war?

The principal dinner guest was Prof John Lennox of the University of Oxford.

VIPs included Rt Rev John Chalmers, Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland; His Grace the Most Rev Philip Tartaglia, Archbishop of Glasgow; Rev Dr Martin Fair, Convener of 'Why Believe?'; Dr Lars Dahle of NLA University, Norway; NASA astronaut Lt Jim Dutton.



Professor John Lennox

Just two days later the Glasgow Clyde Auditorium (the Armadillo) housed an audience of 2,500 people gathered for ***In Concert with the Cosmos*** - an evening with the Springfield Cambridge Festival Chorus and Orchestra, the Craigholme School Choir, Tenors UnLimited, Jim Dutton and John Lennox.



Above: A galaxy of singing and speaking talent assembles for *In Concert with the Cosmos*

Two very contrasting high profile approaches to exploring a single theme: that of science and God. The theme was embodied in music, in film excerpts and interviews. The seeds of ***Grasping the Nettle*** - Scotland's unique interdenominational initiative on science and God - had truly been sown.

## Thereafter...

The success of these events fostered a range of discussions about whether the time was right for the church in Scotland to address the underlying question, of importance to believers and non-believers alike: *in the light of modern science, does the evidence appear to confirm or undermine the case for a creator?* It was concluded - after discussions with representatives of the Church of Scotland, the Free Church of Scotland, the Scottish Episcopal Church, the Baptist Church and the Catholic Church - that addressing the question was 'of its time'.

## Grasping the Nettle is Born



Professor Glynn Harrison

Almost exactly one year on: the same Glasgow hotel; again around 200 dinner guests gather, this time, to hear an address by Professor Glynn Harrison of Bristol University on God and the Mind. On the same evening, after a twelve month broad consultation, Grasping the Nettle (GTN) was officially constituted under the auspices of the



The GTN annual dinner in 2015

Search for Truth Charitable Trust and with representation from Scotland's main denominations. GTN's first Chairman was the previous year's Moderator of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland, Very Rev Dr John Chalmers.

## The God Question Series

The embryonic Grasping the Nettle formed its agenda around the *Exploring The God Question* DVD study series, with the subtitle *Science, God and the Search for Truth*—based on the international Broadcast TV series. The programmes explore the wonder of the Cosmos, the enigma of Life on Earth and probe the deep mysteries of the Human Mind and Brain (Consciousness) to ask if chance events or a creator's intention is the most likely cause. Taking evidence from both sides of the God and science debate, it was to become an international bestseller to TV companies across the world. Produced by Kharis Productions Ltd, The God Question series was commissioned by Search for Truth Charitable Trust - a body committed to challenging the atheist monopoly of the public address system in relation to science and religion.

## The Challenges Addressed

GTN was established to address a number of issues facing the church in contemporary society:

- A widespread assumption in secular society that contemporary science makes God redundant
- Clear evidence of a secularist agenda aiming to detach Western culture from its Christian roots
- The general population being susceptible to accepting the false choice: God versus Science
- Generations missing from churches and a continuing decline in membership
- A growing resistance to religious influence in schools
- A consequent concern and diminished confidence amongst Christians
- The Church appearing uncertain – and even divided – about how to respond

## The GTN Remit

In essence, GTN aspired to:

- Demonstrate consistency between the Christian worldview and science
- Respond effectively to the atheist view that belief in God is a 'delusion'
- Create opportunities for the church to engage with the key issues in an accessible way
- Encourage sharing the agenda within the broader community
- Promote respectful dialogue between science and religion

## The GTN Vision

Beyond the day to day activities of its operation, GTN developed a vision of the impact that could be made:

- A church confident in the rational foundation of its core beliefs
- The Christian worldview demonstrably interpreting scientific findings and existence more adequately than atheism does
- Christianity re-established as a credible worldview in academia and the media
- Atheism publicly put under the microscope of reason—and challenged to respond
- Press interest in the ongoing debate

## The Modus Operandi of Grasping the Nettle

GTN is led by its interdenominational steering board and given ad hoc advice by its Council of Advisers, formed by personnel from the worlds of business, media, science, education, politics, academia and the church.

Its outreach activities are designed to **engage**, **educate** and then **energise** Christians for action across society.

GTN is managed by personnel from Kharis Productions Ltd on behalf of Search for Truth Charitable Trust and has had a part time Liaison Officer since January 2019.

Principally its outreach activities comprise:

- **Presentations** on God and science to churches and church leaders

- **What a Wonder-Full World!** events - through music, drama, film excerpts and conversation with scientists - to engage interest in the agenda



- Exploring the God Question **Study Sessions** (typically 6)



- **Lectures and conferences**



- **School and classroom based activities**



- **Online learning**



GTN's effectiveness is enhanced by a developing army of volunteers. The Making an Impact Together strategy has led to hundreds of ad hoc activities, undertaken by volunteers, forming a tapestry of influence on the life of the church in Scotland and well beyond its walls.

## Listing of Known Activities in the Life of GTN

A list of main events taking place over the life of GTN has been maintained. The **Events Listing Schedule** is an indication of the extent, variety and reach of GTN activities. It is available on request from [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org)

## Evaluation

In its short lifespan, GTN has made a significant impact on church life in Scotland.

**Thousands of church members have moved from a position of relative ignorance about science** - and how it has sometimes been hijacked for an atheistic cause - to one where they have been **inspired and empowered by new understanding** of how the scientific story of our existence lends real credibility to the Christian worldview.

Events with **international guest speakers** have not only **heightened the profile of GTN within the church but also across the general population** through **press coverage** and also through periodic **partnerships with secular organisations** which include The Glasgow Royal Philosophical Society, The Dundee Science Centre and the Institute of Physics in Scotland.

The visits of international guests has also contributed to significant **secular media coverage** - profiling that helpfully spreads the GTN agenda.

Beginning with Exploring the God Question sessions, some churches/presbyteries have gone on to request more detailed **training in apologetics** thinking.

Among the most outstanding examples are those presbyteries of Lochaber, Sutherland and Skye where there have been **in-depth day-long conferences** on the subject.



Vatican Astronomer Dr Guy Consolmagno, guest of GTN, addresses an audience of 300+ at the Glasgow Royal Philosophical Society

The Presbytery of Glasgow has been one of several **church partners** with GTN in the organising of significant events - notably in the Glasgow University Memorial Chapel - with international guest speakers and also in a schools conference.

The Presbytery of Melrose has invested a significant amount of time and money in **schools conferences**.

The Presbytery of Perth took the major initiative to sponsor a very successful ***What a Wonder-Full World!* event in Perth Theatre**.

The Scottish Catholic Education Service has promoted the use of The God Question across all Catholic secondary schools in Scotland. **Thousands of young people have been impacted.**

**Individuals** have used The God Question resources extensively in colleges and universities, with outstanding impact.

**The GTN database** has almost 1000 subscribers.

**Grasping the Nettle is now known internationally** and works cooperatively with similar initiatives overseas.

The initiative is sponsored and financed by Search for Truth Charitable Trust. Its work has attracted financial support from a range of funding organisations including the John Templeton Foundation in the USA, Scotland based Souter Trust, The Jerusalem Trust, The Sir Halley Stewart Trust, The Vardy Foundation, the Novum Trust, the GEM Trust, ACTS and others, including individuals, who prefer to remain anonymous.

ACTS in Scotland gave a grant allowing the appointment of a part-time **liaison officer**, whose work 'on the ground' offers GTN considerable expansion potential.

The above demonstrates that Grasping the Nettle is not a narrow or niche activity, but is fulfilling a recognised need. Nevertheless, it has more potential still to make a broader impact. Positioned, rightly, outside denominational boundaries, GTN's complete independence is both its ecumenical strength and its potential weakness.



Dr Deborah Haarsma, President of Bio-Logos, addresses a GTN audience

## Moving Ahead

### An Expanding Agenda

Grasping the Nettle offers to speak with one voice for and through the church about the evidence on which Christian faith is based. As GTN strategises for the future, faith and science will remain a core element on the agenda. However, the aim to present an evidence-based apologetic should not be confined to issues arising from science. GTN proposes therefore to expand its key focus.

Firstly, that will include the exploration of how science and scripture, together, provide an enriched understanding of the big picture of reality.



Jerusalem and the Sea of Galilee

Secondly, as a *Christian* organisation GTN upholds the centrality of Christ as co-architect of the creation and also as the divinely appointed means through which God has revealed himself to the world. As GTN enters the next phase, its apologetic will encompass the evidence for the creator revealed not only through the lens of science but also through the window of history in the person of Jesus of Nazareth.

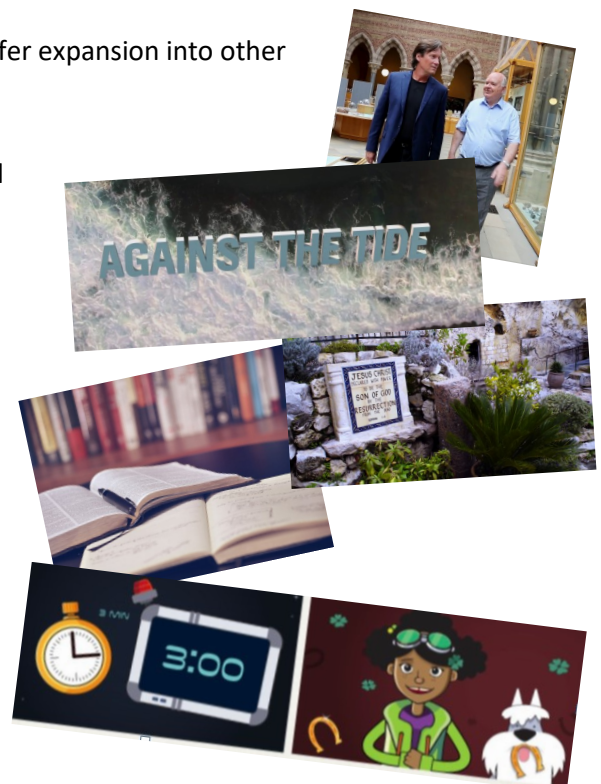
The production of new resources facilitates and encourages the proposed expansion.

Thirdly, GTN will prioritise investing in God's people. Recognising that making a national impact depends on the mobilisation and deployment of Christians in every walk of life, GTN upholds the importance of educating and equipping church members and providing CPD for church leaders.

### New Resources and New Themes

As GTN contemplates its future new forthcoming resources will offer expansion into other areas of 'the big questions'. In summary these are:

- The newly released God Question for Starters offers a 'fast track' approach to examining the big issues around God and science
- The cinematic film *Against the Tide*, produced by Kharis Productions, with its twin focus on God of creation and God revealed in Jesus of Nazareth
- New programmes in The God Question series investigating the evidence for the central Christian claim of Jesus' resurrection from the dead and also the paradox presented by 'a God of love in a world of suffering'
- Scripture and The God Question: Engagements with Bible passages which together present the God of creation and his ultimate redemptive plan
- The Story of Nearly Everything - the forthcoming ten-part children's animation series addresses a new and younger audience



## Identity, Values and Principles

In carrying out its task, GTN does not directly adopt the role of missional evangelism; that is the role of the Church. However, where it functions effectively, GTN strengthens the conviction that Christianity is true and in so doing prepares and enables the Church for its role of mission in the world.

To be effective, GTN aims to embody the following:

- **Unity in Christ:** The mission of the Church depends on God's people being united in the Son and empowered by the Spirit. In Scotland we seek to mirror this inter-church unity in all we do.
- **Intellectual Rigour:** Believing that all truth belongs to God, GTN faces up to intellectual challenges and attempts to learn from those scholars best equipped to teach and inform.
- **Holistic Application:** As well as promoting and facilitating the spread of the Christian worldview, GTN asserts the importance of the practical out-working of our learning. This includes highlighting the importance of creation care, demonstrating a Christ centred concern for the ills and injustices of society and the cultivation of respectful loving relationships.



## Programme Areas

### 1. Public Forums



With the aim of making sure that evidence for Christian faith is widely known, GTN will to continue to ENGAGE its audience through a variety of programmes such as What A Wonder-Full World and Exploring the God Question sessions. More media coverage of 'the God question' - the *subject*, not the series - in **secular media** also remains an important aspiration.

### 2. Training and Resourcing

With the aim of making sure that every Christian in Scotland has the opportunity to understand the basic evidence for their faith GTN will continue to EQUIP via conferences, seminars, film productions and online discussion.

### 3. Youth Education



With the aim of making sure that every young person in Scotland has the opportunity to understand the evidence for Christian faith GTN will continue to promote *Introducing the God Question* in schools, liaise with educational leaders and also with church based youth organisations. The importance of engaging the latter in the GTN agenda, as a means of helping them deepen their confidence in the Christian faith cannot be over-estimated.

### 4. Mobilisation of Personnel

With the aim of making sure that as many Christians as possible are proactive in sharing their faith GTN will continue to mobilise and ENERGISE its Steering Board, Council of Advisers and members as effectively as possible in 'Making an Impact Together'. Naturally there is plenty scope for the **spread of the present initiative** to areas of Scotland, ecclesiastically as well as geographically, so far relatively untouched by GTN.

GTN will continue to deploy its Liaison Officer integrally with all of the above while also using the Grasping the Nettle website and quarterly newsletters to inform and update our constituency .

The success of GTN's initiatives continues to depend on widespread support and participation.

## What Does the Church Achieve by Grasping the Nettle?

A reinvigorated and growing church

Christians better equipped to understand issues of science and faith

Increasing confidence to respond to false claims that science inevitably leads to atheism

Christians in respectful dialogue with one another and with others

Churches supported to engage with the wider community in discussion of the big questions

Christians better versed in evidence for the life and resurrection of Jesus.

## What Can Grasping the Nettle Achieve in Our Wider Society?

Dialogue about evidence for God taking place in a range of public forums, including mass media and social media

Open discussion and respectful dialogue

Challenging the conflict scenario of God versus science

A partnership between church and society exploring the big questions about ourselves and the world we inhabit

Modelling a means of creating engagement between church and society that can be adapted in other countries

The general public being more aware that Christianity is an evidence-based faith.

