



# GRASPING THE NETTLE

## NEWSLETTER

Spring/Summer 2022

### THE EASTER QUESTION



Galilee, where St John records the risen Christ appeared to his disciples

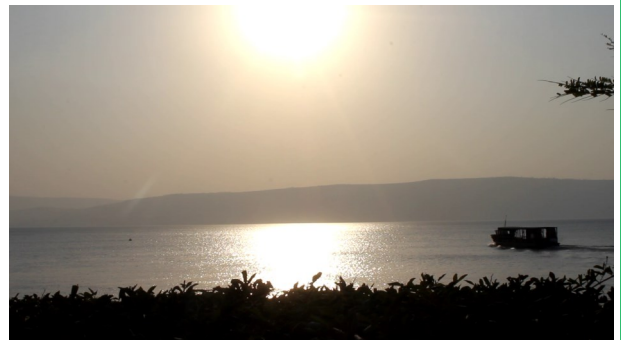
For almost 2,000 years the Christian church has proclaimed as fact the bodily resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead, on the third day after his crucifixion. St Paul would approve! He asserted that, *"If Christ has not been raised, our preaching is useless and so is your faith"*. (1 Corinthians 15:14) It is stark and clear!

Not surprisingly, the fundamental importance to Christians of the resurrection makes it a strategic target for scepticism. *"Jesus did not rise from the dead"* insists the prominent American atheist Dan Barker in a debate entitled 'Does the God of the Bible exist?' Citing 'swoon theory' and 'hallucination theory' as possibilities his most vigorous criticisms of the fact of resurrection centre on anomalies in the gospels' resurrection morning narratives as well as the scientific improbabilities of a corpse coming back to life. Such counter arguments are evident in other world faiths. Islam asserts Jesus did not actually die on the cross while Judaism says he was not raised from the dead. Clearly the disciples disagree.

NT Wright in his book 'The Resurrection of the Son of God' asks *"How do we explain the fact that they went out into the Gentile world with the news of something that had happened at the heart of Judaism, in the belief that this was not only relevant, but urgent for the whole world?"*



Christian Pilgrims hold a worship service on the Sea of Galilee



Tourist craft on the Sea of Galilee



Towards Capernaum by the Sea of Galilee. The home town of Jesus.

So where do we go from here?

Professor John Lennox consistently emphasises the importance of scrutinising evidence. It is solid advice. Search for Truth Charitable Trust, sponsor of GTN, has commissioned Kharis Productions to add a programme to the God Question series which objectively considers the arguments around the resurrection of Jesus.

GTN is also widening its remit to address this and other prominent Christian apologetics questions. Is it important? As Professor Alister McGrath comments in a recently released programme in Kharis Productions new global series 'Science & God: the Search for Meaning and Truth', *"If the incarnation and the resurrection are true, that's a game changer."*



Jesus appeared to his disciples by the Sea of Galilee

### A VIEW FROM THE CHAIR

By Very Rev Dr Martin Fair

I was a visitor at a church last Sunday morning and was made to feel very welcome and beyond that, it was a wonderful service of worship.

All good, apart from the fact that there were no children or teens or young adults. If I'm not mistaken, there was nobody there who would have been less than mid-50s.

I rejoice in the faithfulness of the older adults who make up that congregation - and countless others like it across the land. But it's hardly the solution to a complex maths problem to conclude that unless that situation is addressed - and quickly - then these congregations will have no future. Belatedly, The Church of Scotland has, like most denominations, recognised the issue and has identified engaging younger age groups as a strategic priority. But agreeing such aims counts for nothing unless the changes needed to make them happen are equally warmly embraced.



It's with all of this in mind that I'm delighted to make mention of recent developments within the life of Grasping the Nettle - principally our working towards the creation of a Youth Network. An online meeting convened at the end of March saw sixteen young adult Christians coming together to consider what such a network might look like and to engage in discussion more generally concerning the GTN rationale and how young people can be both involved and supported in their faith journeys.

When you consider that almost the same number again are keen to be involved but were unavailable on that particular occasion, it's clear that there is much to be encouraged about.

Reaching out to and including young people is a big step in the right direction. The bolder step still will be allowing them to genuinely influence our future direction of travel. Let it be so.

**GTN wishes you a happy and blessed Easter!**

## RESURRECTION STORIES COMPARED

One of the principal arguments of sceptics in relation to the resurrection is that the four gospel accounts of that significant morning don't always match up. It's a point actor Kevin Sorbo put to Professor John Lennox during the production of the film *Against the Tide*.

*KEVIN: Resurrection morning is the scene of the most extraordinary story in all of history. Naturally, the gospel writers give it prominence.*

*But, as I re-visit each one in turn, I become aware that each story presents a different version of the events.*

*In Luke's account, there were two angels at the tomb.*

*In the other gospels, there was one.*

*In John's gospel, Jesus appeared to Mary in the garden.*

*There is no such reference in the other accounts.*

*Could this be a weakness at the very heart of the evidence?*

*JOHN: Well I'd really like to challenge the assumption underlying the question. If you have reporting even today by four witnesses of the same events, there will be variation. But what any jury would be asked to decide is whether, despite the differences, there is unanimous agreement about the central fact. And there is. The fact that we've got four accounts actually enhances the veracity of the story rather than takes away from it. We mustn't miss the most important fact here: that they all agree that Jesus rose from the dead!*



John and Kevin in dialogue outside Jerusalem's city wall.

### Screening Against the Tide

Award winning *Against the Tide* is available for individual viewing and screening in church. Why not organise an event in your church or local cinema? Intrigue your audience with

- the evidence for God *in science* as well as
- the evidence for Jesus and the resurrection *in history*

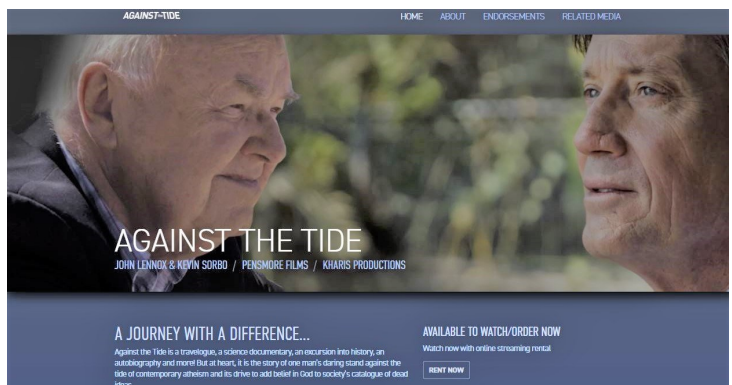


Around 200 gather in All Souls Church, London for a screening of *Against the Tide*.

Access the film via DVD, Blu-ray or web streaming—which now offers the option to view the film in two separate parts. Have a refreshments interval or screen over two separate evenings. Visit

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

If you have further enquiries please contact [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org).



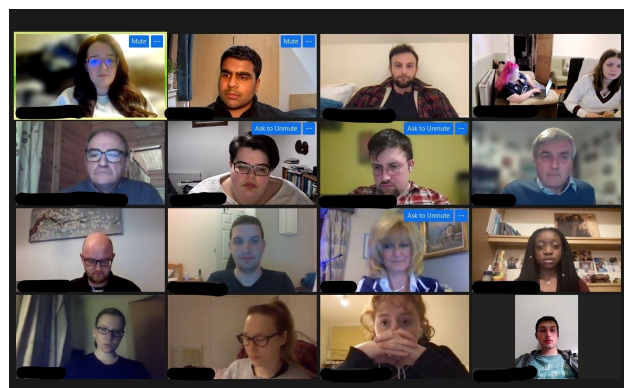
[www.againstthetidemovie.org](http://www.againstthetidemovie.org)

## GTN YOUTH ASSEMBLY

You're correct! 'Youth Assembly' is too grandiose a label for what GTN has established so far. But for sure, good progress is being made in our efforts to find ways of supporting young people in exploring big questions of faith.



Rev George Lind leads COSY young people in *The God Question for Starters*



Consulting representatives of Scotland's Christian young people

contact was made with a range of young Christians and their leaders. As a result, in March 2022 GTN's Youth Liaison Officer, Shahrukh Gill, led an initial meeting of young people keen to have the support in exploring with GTN the big questions that perplex them.

*"We know that every generation has its own unique issues to face and today's young people are no exception,"* comments Shahrukh Gill. *"A contemporary challenge is the way that social media create a world in which only the sound-bite and sensationalism is valued. And, ironically, media that are designed to connect people can make most feel quite isolated from a genuine human connection."*



GTN Youth Development Officer, Shahrukh Gill

An important starting point was the posing and answering of four crucial questions:

- Is there a stigma associated with being known as a Christian? If so, why?
- What are the biggest challenges to faith faced by young people?
- Why is it important for young Christians to be able to explore faith related questions together?
- How can Grasping the Nettle help?

*"The answers were fulsome, comprehensive and impressively mature,"* added Shahrukh. *"They are well documented and we are in the process of building a response plan."*

GTN aims not only to respond to the immediate needs of young Christians but also to continue building for the future.

Very Rev Dr Martin Fair highly values GTN's early preparation for passing the baton to the next generation, so ensuring legacy. *"Any successful initiative with a lifespan of only a few years can have great intrinsic value,"* said GTN's chairman. *"We only have to consider the brief public ministry of Jesus to realise that. However, it's clear from the gospels that legacy was always part of the plan.*

*Without it, there would be no Christian church!"*

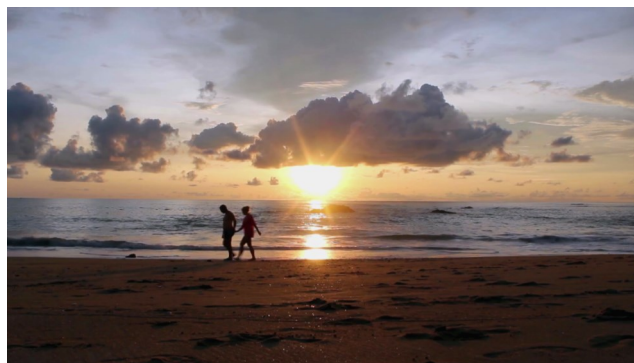


Ironically, media designed to connect people can isolate them

## NEW SERIES RECEIVES WARM WELCOME IN THE FAR EAST

This year Kharis Productions and Search for Truth Enterprises released a new series: **Science and God: the Search for Meaning and Truth.**

With substantial filming undertaken in the Far East, the aim is to bring, especially to a Chinese audience, something of the wonder of our existence and to raise associated big questions about whether or not that richness we see in nature, and ultimately in human beings, all point to our origins being the intention of a transcendent creator. That is essentially a religious question but spirituality is widespread with Christianity, Buddhism and Taoism all being part of the religious mix in the Far East.



What is the place of human beings in the universe? What is the meaning of life?



Venerable Sik Hin Hung explains why Buddhists say the universe doesn't need a 'first cause'.

The question is: how does each of these culturally well established religions answer the big questions? What do they say can be known of 'the first cause' of our existence? What is so distinctive about Christian claims and what is the evidence used to support the respective answers of these religions?

*"We hope that the programmes will really engage the interest of many in the Far East,"* said Search for Truth Chairman, Professor John Spence. *"As far as we know there is nothing similar available anywhere in the world."*

But how will the programmes be distributed and where? Already a team of enthusiastic promoters is being assembled - from Singapore to Hong Kong and Macau, as well as from Taiwan to Malaysia. Reaching viewers in mainland China is also part of the promotional strategy.



Professor Alister McGrath reflects on why Christianity is a 'game changer'.

Speaking from his home in Macau, one promoter said, *"I have shown the films to pastors here and the interest in the films is high. One minister especially wants to show the films to groups of young people of high school age."*

It should not be forgotten either that part of the Chinese community is spread across the world - including in the UK.

Robin Murphy, working among Chinese students who are studying at Queens University, Belfast said, *"I find these programmes to be extremely useful in my work among Chinese post-graduate science students. The series provides a great means of reaching out to them in ways that are sympathetic towards their culture and worldview."*



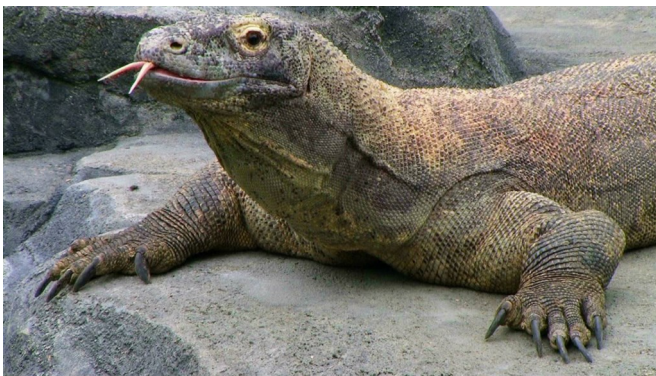
We live in a universe of wonder! It is a major focus of programme 1



Traditional Chinese ancestor worship in Vietnam

Our Macau promoter noted, *“The Chinese group viewing today was greatly interested in episode 3 which they thought would be especially appreciated by mainland young people who have a relatively serious outlook on life”*.

Associate producer Karen Rollins concludes, *“Here then is a golden opportunity for Far Easterners of any religious background or none - and wherever they are - to really grasp the nettle of what lies behind the wonders of our existence.”* Potentially millions are interested to explore that issue—and the additional question: was the creator revealed in Jesus of Nazareth and, if so, why?



Why is there such diversity on earth? An important question in programme 2



The Galapagos Islands: central to the insights of Charles Darwin

*“Let’s not forget,”* adds Professor Spence, *“that these programmes are labelled ‘global’ not just ‘Far East’.”* A version of the series with the title ‘Science and the Ultimate Question’ is presently being marketed by distributors Flame International.



Consciousness and spirituality are the main themes of programme 3.

The first sale was to the Czech Republic and seems to confirm the series should be of interest and value to anyone in any culture, including our Grasping the Nettle community in Scotland.

To learn more about ‘Science and God’ and/or to web stream the series visit:

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

It is available in Chinese as well as English!



In three documentary programmes, world renowned contributors from the USA, the UK and the Far East explore how Christianity, Buddhism, Daoism and Atheism answer the biggest question of all.

**ANNOUNCING...**

**THE NEXT TWO EVENTS IN OUR POPULAR GTN ONLINE SESSIONS**

**GENESIS 1 MEETS CONTEMPORARY SCIENCE**

on

**Wednesday 20th April at 7.30pm**

with

**Rev Dr David Fergusson OBE**  
**Regius Professor of Divinity, University of Cambridge**

and

**Rev Dr Fergus Macdonald**  
**Former General Secretary of United Bible Societies**

A perceived clash of truth between the Genesis story of our origins and the narrative told by contemporary science has fuelled an ongoing, sometimes acrimonious, debate between science and religion since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. But is Genesis aiming to teach us science? If not, what is its core purpose?

In this session we will be exploring what Genesis 1 is saying to us and the relevance of science to that exploration. To reserve a place, email [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org).

**THE BRAIN, SPIRITUALITY, THE SOUL AND OTHER BIG QUESTIONS**

on

**Thursday 19<sup>th</sup> May at 7.30pm**

with

**Dr Ian Morrison**  
**Consultant Neurologist, Ninewells Hospital, Dundee**

and

**Professor Chris Packard CBE**  
**Biochemist and Lead Researcher for NHS Greater Glasgow & Clyde**

In a presentation to GTN earlier this year, Dr Ian Morrison entitled its final part “What Lies Beyond Science?” The richness of the content, and the issues raised, are the basis for this follow up session in which we will try to grapple with how in a world dominated by science, we might attempt to understand dimensions of spirituality that are beyond the realm of science. To reserve a place, email [office@graspingthenettle.org](mailto:office@graspingthenettle.org).

## WATCH: A LIBRARY OF LEARNING

GTN Online has three main programme strands in our live events. Recordings of previous events are available in the Watch section of our website [www.graspingthenettle.org/watch](http://www.graspingthenettle.org/watch).

- **Exploring Further:** Developing further conversations around subjects on the agenda previously.
- **WOW!** An abbreviation standing for ‘wonder upon wonder’, these programmes illustrate how human beings embody the concept first verbalised by a Psalmist: ‘I am fearfully and wonderfully made’ (Psalm 139:14).
- **As I See it:** A personal perspective on an important subject.

In the first quarter of 2022, GTN Online featured each of these strands.

### THE RECENT PAST

#### Exploring Further: Artificial Intelligence—with Professor John Lennox: January 2022



Known worldwide for his extensive scientific knowledge—as well as for using it in his famous debates with atheists—John Lennox’s expertise extends well beyond the natural sciences. One of his recent books is entitled ‘2084: Artificial Intelligence and the Future of Humanity’.

Using the accustomed GTN online approach to presenting in three sections, Professor Lennox’s opening was entitled ‘What is Artificial Intelligence (AI)? He distinguished between two types of AI: narrow AI and general AI. The first is a computer based system that performs a function that normally requires human intelligence e.g. in diagnosing disease. It thus simulates human intelligence; it is not consciousness. The second is AGI: artificial general intelligence: the concept of creating a

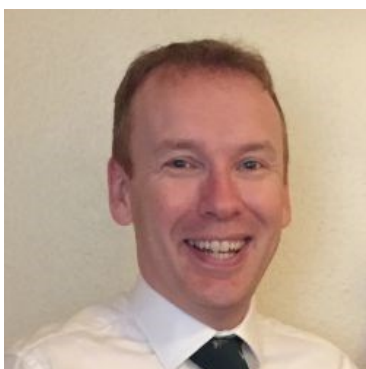
system that can do everything humans can do but much more and faster. It represents the move towards a super intelligence. But where is this taking us?

The ongoing march of AI has major implications for ethics and the future of humanity and much of the rest of the session was concerned with it. The professor pointed out that Elon Musk describes AI as potentially “*summoning the demon.*” What then should the attitude of the Church be to AI and what are the church’s key ecclesiastical ethical responsibilities in this context? It is one of the most important questions in relation to the future of the world.



The power of AI. For good or for ill?

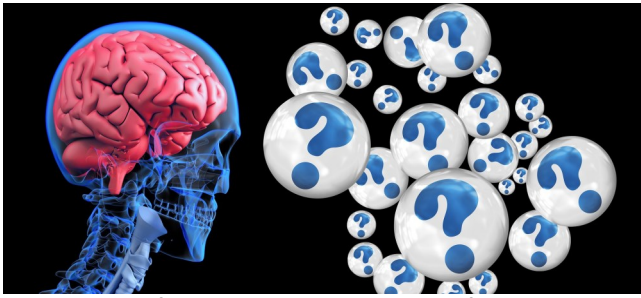
#### WOW! The Wonders of the Brain – with Consultant Neurologist Dr Ian Morrison: February 2022



There are few, if any, phenomena more staggering in their power than the human brain. In an evening packed with astonishing information—as well as big questions, Consultant Neurologist Dr Ian Morrison wowed the audience with both the power and mystery of what takes place within our heads! Beginning with an overview of the nervous system, he illustrated how the complex mechanisms involved begin to form in an embryo of only 4-5 weeks. Three weeks later that mechanism is even more sophisticated.



In the second section of the 3-part presentation, the focus moved to the subject of consciousness and its mysteries. What is consciousness? Is it just a series of electrical signals or a system so complex and sophisticated that it defeats the efforts of the most erudite scientists to explain? This theme was developed more in the final section where the key question was *'What (about consciousness) lies beyond science? Are we really beyond scientific understanding? What theological questions therefore emerge?'* There was so much 'unfinished business' that a further session with Dr Morrison and others has been scheduled. Meantime why not visit the GTN Forum where you will find a range of inputs under the heading 'More on Mind and Consciousness—and God'. Dr Morrison is one of the contributors to the written discussion.



The subject of consciousness poses a lot of unanswered questions

### As I See It: 'Unbelievable?' with Justin Brierley: March 2022

GTN Online's most recent event featured Premier Christian Radio presenter, Justin Brierley, who hosts the channel's weekly 'Unbelievable?' show. Its general pattern is that each week a topic, important to Christians, is debated with a prominent Christian and a high profile sceptic. Consequently, there are no hiding places from the most controversial and difficult-to-handle issues—from the basic *'Is There Evidence for God?'* and *'Can We Trust the Bible?'* to *'Demons: Do They Exist?'* and *'Has Neuroscience Killed God?'*



In March, Justin was GTN's featured guest and was interviewed on why after decades of talking with atheists he is still a Christian. Several answers are available to read in Justin's book, understandably entitled 'Unbelievable?' (The question mark is always crucial!)



Justin Brierley in conversation, about the future of humanity, with Nick Spencer (a Christian) of Theos Think Tank and Steven Pinker (an Atheist) of Harvard University

Topics covered in the GTN event include the 'Unbelievable?' encounters that have left an indelible impression on the presenter, the potential dangers of exposing believers to a weekly diet of scepticism, and

*'In your view are the arguments and counter-arguments about God finely balanced or does the finger of evidence point more clearly in one direction?'*

*'What do you think are the big issues on which the God question can be decided?'*

And finally...

*'How real is God to you?'*

For anyone interested in the issues and questions facing Christians today, this recording is a 'must see'.

All of the above events are available to view in the Watch section of [www.graspingthenettle.org](http://www.graspingthenettle.org)

## CAN CHANCE HAVE INTENTION?



In programme one of the God Question series, Nobel Laureate Professor Steven Weinberg declares that human beings are “*winner in a cosmic lottery*”. Thereby, he is expressing his view on the central question of the whole series: ‘are we here by chance or by intention?’

Often those who favour the chance explanation highlight evidence of randomness in nature. Their arguments appear to be supported by the central concept in Charles Darwin’s theory of evolution: ‘random mutation and natural selection’. It is not necessarily a comforting thought for those who believe the universe has a purpose. They prefer the conclusion of Einstein who did not believe in cosmic randomness. He saw order in nature and emphasised that “*God does not play dice*”.

The problem with randomness is that it appears to negate there being a sense of purpose in nature. If true, it is difficult to avoid concluding that human beings are a chance phenomenon and not the reason the universe exists; for the universe would have no purpose.

Perhaps the key to resolving the apparently irreconcilable viewpoints is to realise that randomness itself can have a purpose. For example, randomness can be used to provide encryption and therefore improve security. Perhaps more significantly, is the realisation that throughout the history of science, there has been increasing discovery of patterns that were eventually described as laws. Might our understanding evolve to the point where laws underlying mutations are discovered? Evolutionary biologist Simon Conway Morris believes so and emphasises that far from the products of evolution “being fortuitous and accidental, evolution is remarkably predictable.”



Are there laws of nature underpinning our whole existence?

Richard Dawkins vigorously opposes the view that evolution is ‘just chance’ and argues that mutations are constrained by a range of factors. Even the weather, which can appear to be chaotic, has been discovered to follow predictable patterns.

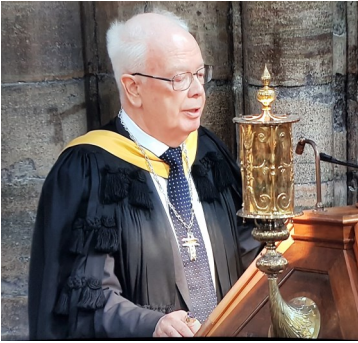
It’s also worth noting that a dice is carefully designed and is a means of distributing apparently chance outcomes. Arguably, the author of Proverbs 16:33 had remarkable insight in concluding: “*The lot is cast into the lap but its every decision is from the Lord.*”



A dice is carefully designed

*(The above was motivated by an article entitled “The Ineffable Purpose of Randomness” published by the John Templeton Foundation.)*

## DISTINGUISHED PLACE FOR GTN CONNECTED SCOTS IN DUKE'S SERVICE OF REMEMBRANCE



Two prominent Scottish public figures had significant roles in the Service of Remembrance for HRH The Duke of Edinburgh held in Westminster Abbey on 29<sup>th</sup> March. The Rt Hon The Lord Wallace of Tankerness QC—currently Moderator of the Church of Scotland as well as an enthusiastic supporter of Grasping the Nettle—read from Isaiah 40.



Professor David Fergusson, Dean of the Order of the Thistle and of the Chapel Royal Scotland offered a prayer of thanksgiving. He also holds the Regius Chair of Divinity at the University of Cambridge.

Professor Fergusson is member of the GTN Council of Advisers and will contribute to the next GTN online on 20<sup>th</sup> April.

## SOCIAL MEDIA

At GTN we are expanding our social media presence beyond **Facebook**. Find us now on **Instagram**, **Youtube** and **Linkedin**:



<https://www.instagram.com/graspingthenettle/>



[Grasping The Nettle - YouTube](#)



<https://www.linkedin.com/company/grasping-the-nettle>



<https://www.facebook.com/graspingthenettle/>

## SUPPORTING GTN



Finally... 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.graspingthenettle.org/donate](http://www.graspingthenettle.org/donate).

GTN is an interdenominational initiative of churches in Scotland, using Exploring the God Question as its key resource. It is administered by Search for Truth Charitable Trust (Charity No: SC039465. Company No: SC340300), a registered charity and private limited company registered in Scotland.