



GRASPING THE NETTLE

NEWSLETTER

SUMMER 2019

How Many Ways to Grasp a Nettle?

*“Tender-handed stroke a nettle
And it stings you, for your pains;
Grasp it like a man of mettle
And it soft as silk remains”* (Aaron Hill)

According to the adage, if you want to avoid a nettle sting, grasp it firmly! Today the stings experienced by the Church come from a variety of nettles. The latest religious attitudes research reports:

- Public perception that religious organisations are putting themselves at odds with mainstream values
- A dramatic decline in identification with Christian denominations
- A substantial increase in atheism



Ouch! This stinging information can leave the church looking rather desperately for the legendary dock leaf thought to relieve the pain of the nettle sting!

GTN is not a dock leaf but it can address the stinging that might be felt when science is (mis)used to attack belief in God. This misuse of science is the main argument and driving force for the (atheistic) secularisation of society. It has had a devastating effect on the Christian community. Through understanding the main issues, GTN attempts to be an antidote to the science vs God stereotype—within the church and beyond.

Consequently the recent visit to Scotland of Dr Deborah Haarsma, as guest of GTN, encompassed a **wide range of events and audiences**. The President of Grand Rapids based BioLogos praised the scope and diversity of GTN's approach. She was especially enthused by her experience of a school conference and a Wonder-Full World event, adding: *“May God bless you for all the ways you are bringing a better narrative on science and faith to Scotland and the world”*. Read more throughout this newsletter.

Five Days of Hectic GTN Activity began with the Annual Dinner



GTN Chairman Very Rev Dr Angus Morrison introduces Dr Deborah Haarsma to the GTN audience.

With some guests travelling from as far away as Muir of Ord and Portree, the banqueting room of the Alona Hotel in Strathclyde Park was the venue for the annual GTN dinner. Among the principal guests were Moderator of the Church of Scotland Rt Rev Colin Sinclair and Moderator of the Free Church of Scotland Rev Donnie G. Macdonald.

Intriguing the audience with insight into the wonders of the cosmos, Dr Haarsma, who herself is an astrophysicist, demonstrated how erudite scientists have theists as well as atheists among them. As a committed Christian, she offered reasons why her Christian worldview makes more sense of the wonders of the cosmos than an atheist's interpretation which is rooted necessarily in exclusively chance explanations. Many commented on how skilfully Dr Haarsma had presented the information at a level appreciated by the most scientifically literate in the audience as well as by those for whom science is more challenging to understand.



Dr Haarsma presents *Declaring the Glory of God* in her intriguingly entitled talk *Do You See What I See?*



Church of Scotland Moderator Rt Rev Colin Sinclair affirmed the importance of GTN to the Church in its witness and evangelism

Several guests were new to GTN and it is encouraging to see that the constituency continues to grow. The intention is that GTN dinner events should be pitched at a level that may be described as “highly accessible for a mixed audience”.

Testing for God in the Classroom

Williamwood High School in East Renfrewshire was the venue for an afternoon school conference which featured astronomer Deborah Haarsma with keynote talks built around the viewing of extracts from *Introducing the God Question*, a series specially created for the senior school curriculum. Group discussion was at the heart of the conference.



Dr Deborah Haarsma with Head Teacher Mr W. Inglis and Head of Science Mr T. Fearn discussing last minute logistics before the commencement of the conference.



Around 90 senior school students engaged with the God question issues introduced by Deborah Haarsma.

In two stimulating short presentations Dr Haarsma raised key issues in relation to the origin of the cosmos, the subsequent development of an ordered universe and the finely tuned forces that make life on earth possible. So does this understanding of the cosmos leave space for God?

The Q&A, provided great insight into the high level of student engagement with the subject. One questioner asked what Deborah personally believes is the most convincing explanation of our origins. Her answer was clear. Glasgow Presbytery and Christian Values in Education joined with GTN in the organisation of the event which was also attended by 6 senior staff from Williamwood High School.



The Wonder-Full World of Kilmarnock

...By which we mean that a Wonder-Full World event took place in Kay Park Parish Church, Kilmarnock with astronomer Deborah Haarsma. Wonder-Full World is an 'entry level' creative format to promote thinking about the wonders of our existence and the underlying questions. The varied format uses music, drama, film excerpts and conversation with a scientist to engage the audience.



A 'full house' at Kay Park Parish Church for the Wonder-Full World event with Deborah Haarsma and Scotland based musicians and drama players.



'Cosmic Cut - a scientist walks into a hair salon' is one of two short dramas used to raise big questions—in a humorous and entertaining way—about science and God.

Appreciative members of the audience wrote of an "impressive and inspiring" evening.

All of the artistic and conversational elements were built around four big question:



Where are we? An opportunity to understand something of the grandness of our cosmic environment

How did we get here? Does the development of our ordered universe from an explosion billions of years ago suggest *chance* or *a creator's intention* is the better explanation?

What are we? A reflection on the wonder of being conscious, intelligent, relational human beings.

Who are we? Are we the chance products of a cosmic lottery or people made in the image of God? Where does the finger of evidence point?



The evening's music was provided by the Dreghorn Musical Society with additional contributions from tenor vocalist Alasdair Morris.

And the Spirit of God Moved

What's the connection between Pentecost Sunday and the Genesis creation story? The 'spirit' is the uniting factor. With the final event in Deborah Haarsma's schedule taking place on the day the Christian church had its annual celebration of the coming of the Holy Spirit, the above title was ideal for a Christian astronomer speaking on such an occasion. The event was co-presented with Glasgow Presbytery and was held in the Memorial Chapel of Glasgow University. GTN and the Presbytery are grateful to University Chaplain Rev Stuart MacQuarrie for the privilege of holding the event in such august and appropriate circumstances.



In her talk Dr Haarsma led the 120 strong audience on an intriguing journey into the cosmos to ask the question 'what can we learn about God from the revelations of modern astronomy?'

The presentation was preceded by a short service of worship led by GTN Ambassador at Large Very Rev Dr John Chalmers and Presbytery Clerk Rev George Cowie. The service was carried out in an atmosphere of deep reverence greatly enhanced by contributions from the University Chapel Choir and the reciting of the Apostles' Creed.



This event was the second of two joint ventures between GTN and Glasgow Presbytery during Dr Haarsma's visit.

Very Rev Dr John Chalmers and Rev George Cowie with Deborah Haarsma.

Exploring the God Question at Loch Leven's Larder

Throughout the year a staple diet of GTN activities is the Exploring the God Question sessions. Here GTN Chairman, Very Rev Dr Angus Morrison, leading by example, recounts his experience.

What prompted you to arrange the ETGQ sessions?

Having previously shown the ETGQ programmes to our (Orwell and Portmoak Church) Kirk Session, I had strong Kirk Session support in organising these sessions for church members and the wider community.

Why did you choose a venue outside of the church?

A non-church venue can be easier for folk to come along who don't attend church and for whom the idea of going to a 'church meeting' might be somewhat off-putting. Loch Leven's Larder is a lovely venue and is centrally located in the parish and wider area. The owners made the restaurant available on the six Sunday evenings at a much discounted rate—which included the provision of tea, coffee and scones.

How were the sessions advertised?

We advertised through notices sent to all the churches of every denomination in the area, through community and church newsletters and with posters in local businesses. Word of mouth was as effective a means as any and several church people invited friends along.

How would you describe the audience?

The audience of about thirty on average was an interesting mix. A good number were church people from a variety of denominations. One person attended regularly who used to attend church but hadn't been for many years. At the final session he commented: 'If church had been more like this, I'd never have left!'

Was there any interest evident from folk who are not associated with the church?

There were just a few from outwith the church. However, the mainly young and mainly non-church going Larder staff members who were looking after us - so very well! - I was delighted to note stayed in for the sessions. With several of them I had very interesting conversations and they were highly enthusiastic about what they saw and heard. Who can tell where that might lead?

What was the evening's format?

We began with refreshments so creating an informal atmosphere—as did the fact that we were meeting in a café. I introduced the theme of the evening, after which we watched the relevant programme followed by open discussion. This was always a lively part of the evening and often it was with great reluctance that I had to draw proceedings to a close. Informal conversations often continued afterwards.

How did those present respond to the programmes overall?

There were numerous expressions of: 'very helpful', 'really quite eye-opening', 'fantastic films', 'so many new insights', etc. Many appreciated the way all sides of an issue were given a voice and viewers given space to make up their own minds on the basis of the evidence presented. Only one complaint: we didn't have more time for discussion.

What do you think was achieved?

Some of the best conversations I had were with the young University students working at the Larder who stayed for each of the sessions. I think these young folk were encouraged to think more deeply about the God question. Church people clearly felt encouraged and somewhat better equipped to discuss these important questions.

What advice would you give to others, thinking about organising such sessions ?

The main advice is 'go for it'. Show the programmes in advance to local church leaders as this creates a helpful basis of support for the project and I feel sure you, like me, will find it to be an immensely worthwhile experience.

An Astronomer Special!

GTN is delighted – even over the moon – about the imminent visit of Vatican Astronomer Dr Guy Consolmagno who is “enthusiastically looking forward to” his Scottish schedule and to experiencing the work of GTN first hand.

Dr Consolmagno’s range of commitments will help GTN reach new audiences, particularly in the public square. His visit will also be timed to match ‘lift off’ about GTN in the national press. Be sure to be present at at least one of the sessions: most are for the general public . The GTN conference on Saturday 2nd November is particularly recommended.



Arranged in partnership with Glasgow Presbytery

Glasgow University Memorial Chapel

Wednesday 30th October 2.30pm

Talk title: Adventures of a Vatican Astronomer



*Arranged in partnership with the
Royal Philosophical Society of Glasgow*

John Anderson Building, Strathclyde University

Wednesday 30th October 7.30pm

*Talk title: Why Do We Look Up? What Does it Tell Us
About Us?*

IOP | Institute of Physics
In Scotland

Arranged in partnership with Institute of Physics in Scotland
**School of Physics and Astronomy,
University of Glasgow**

Thursday 31st October at 5pm

Talk title: Strange Cosmologies



Dundee Science Centre

Friday 1st November at 7.30pm

*Talk title: Discarded Images: The History of Strange
Ideas*

Back to School



Dr Consolmagno will participate in two school conferences during his autumn visit to Scotland. A national event organised by the Scottish Catholic Education Service will take place on Thursday 31st October in St Bride's Hall, Motherwell. A second conference will be held the next day for senior pupils in Grove Academy, Broughty Ferry.

This is being arranged in conjunction with Christian Values in Education.

Introducing the God Question will feature in both conferences. It is increasingly becoming a key resource in Scottish classrooms.

The GTN Conference

Heriot-Watt University, Edinburgh

Saturday 2nd November 10am-4pm

Talk Title: All Is One

Join us for this landmark event in the GTN calendar!

The atheist worldview contends that our existence is purposeless and the natural forces that produced it are themselves blind and without intention. How surprising is it therefore to realise that scientists increasingly are inferring 'directionality' in the development of the natural world? Might it be if the story of existence was re-run the outcome might be broadly similar to the one we know? And if there is purpose in the natural world does it point to a higher purpose which Denis Alexander describes as "one with a capital P"? Certainly it is consistent with the Christian worldview of a transcendent creator who had a purpose for his creation and his creatures.



Heriot-Watt University



Dr Guy Consolmagno:

*Is there purpose
in cosmology?*

Dr Denis Alexander:

*Is there purpose
in biology?*



To book please visit [https://](https://www.graspingthenettle.org/events/gtn_national_conference_2019)

www.graspingthenettle.org/events/gtn_national_conference_2019

Introducing Gus

GTN is delighted to have access to—and grateful for— the creative talents of cartoonist Gus (aka Euan McLeod). The value of this medium in all forms of public communication is obvious. So look out for Gus cartoons in newsletters and in GTN social media. The following is an extract from a cartoon story entitled *Do You Believe in Gus?* One of the characters prefers the 'big ink spill' theory as an explanation of his 'inky existence' than to believe that he is the product of an intelligent creator. Recognise it?

