



GRASPING THE NETTLE

SUMMER NEWSLETTER 2017

ROYAL INTEREST IN GRASPING THE NETTLE



The event: Heart and Soul
- marking the opening of
the General Assembly of
the Church of Scotland.

The place: Princes Street
Gardens, Edinburgh.

The date: Sunday 21st
May.

The royal visitor: HRH The
Princess Royal.

Escorted on her tour of the Heart and Soul exhibition by GTN chairman, Very Rev Dr John Chalmers, Princess Anne spent around ten minutes at the GTN booth discussing issues about God and science, showing detailed interest in the *Exploring the God Question* series and enquiring who had produced it. She was clearly impressed with the GTN focus on offering the British public the opportunity to be well informed about an issue that is vitally important in both private and public life. On account of her clear interest, the royal visitor was subsequently presented with a copy of the programmes.

Later, the princess's husband, Sir Tim Laurence, also visited the GTN stand and keenly discussed the subject with producer Iain Morris.



Sir Tim Laurence visits the GTN stand at Heart and Soul

Professor John Spence, chairman of Search for Truth Charitable Trust, which commissioned The God Question series, commented "It is heartening to see such clear evidence of royal respect for the importance, in our country, of a properly balanced and informed discussion about science and God. We are delighted that increasingly throughout Scotland churches are engaging with the subject within their own communities".



HOW MANY WAYS TO GRASP THE NETTLE?

From simple conversations to large scale events the sometimes prickly issue of God and science can be addressed in a variety of ways. In this section of the newsletter we feature two forms of nettle-grasping, both designed to progress the conversation between church and community.

WHAT A WONDER-FULL WORLD!

Billed as an evening of music, film, drama and conversation, such events provide an ideal bridge between church and community by setting an agenda to discuss God and science in an entertaining context. An extract from the advert of the most recent Wonder-Full World Event is provided below.

With a programme described as 'portable', the content can be reproduced in any venue anywhere – and with the inclusion of local talent as available. To have this event in your area contact office@graspingthenettle.org

Kharis Productions Ltd for Grasping the Nettle in Lanarkshire presents

What a Wonder-Full World!

Friday 16th June, 2017 at 7.30pm

Dalziel St Andrew's Church

43-47 Merry Street, Motherwell, ML1 1JJ

An entertaining and thought-provoking evening of music, film, drama and conversation about the wonders of the cosmos, life and the big questions



The Local Press Dimension

Communication was set up with journalists at the Motherwell Times, Hamilton Advertiser, The Airdrie and Coatbridge Advertiser and the East Kilbride News and there was good coverage especially by the Motherwell Times. The story is that churches together are openly discussing 'reasons to believe' with the community. That is a positive image and the newspapers are responding appropriately. See www.motherwelltimes.co.uk/news/seeking-some-answers-to-life-s-big-questions-1-4469884

The Confidence Boosting Dimension

Does God actually exist? Doubting the reality of God's existence is a spiritually demoralising experience for Christians. When articulate public figures hold up science as being the thinking person's alternative to belief in a creator, the doubts proliferate. The event provides the opportunity for the audience to marvel at

The Public Relations Dimension

In days when churches are readily perceived as a divided community, the event highlights how denominations are working together. More significantly, they are uniting around what might be described as the 'elephant in the room' question: *What leads us to think belief in a creator God is anything more than wishful thinking, leading to make believe?*

The Response to Scepticism Dimension

Almost every Christian family is impacted by the rejection of Christian faith, often by the younger generation. 'I no longer believe in God; I believe in science' is a common chorus. What is there to say? The Wonder-Full World event demonstrates that – arguably – science itself demonstrates that God should, and must, remain on any thinking person's agenda.

The Cringe-Free Dimension

The event is not designed to tell people what to think or to conclude about God's existence. Through music, film, conversation and drama (specially created for the programme), the audience will be informed and entertained but, at the same time, be invited to see that our 'Wonder-Full World' raises big questions to which science alone cannot supply the answer. These features of the occasion make it highly suitable for people who have no active church connection. The emphasis is on 'see and decide for yourself'.

The Follow-Up Dimension

Now that the event has passed, there will be opportunities - both online and locally - to Explore the God Question.

Six good reasons why this is much more significant for the Church than 'an opportunity for a wee night out'.

THE GOD DIMENSION – DO SCIENCE AND FAITH NEED EACH OTHER?

The Faith and Science Team at Crown Church, Inverness explains how Grasping the Nettle inspired the creation of a public exhibition on God and science during the Inverness Science Festival



Faced with evidence of public confusion about the compatibility of faith and science, could it be shown - in a way that non-scientists would find attractive and easy to understand - that Christians can readily subscribe to the findings of science and belief in a creator?

From Idea to Action

That germ of an idea arose when attending the first GTN conference.

Inspiring speakers confirmed our resolve to try to present the universe through the lens of science and the eyes of faith. The result was a week-long



The inspiring GTN Conference 2016

exhibition, during Inverness Science Festival Week, entitled 'The God Dimension – Do Science and Faith Need Each Other?'. It was held in Crown Church of Scotland, Inverness.

A Variety of Media

Work went ahead with the writing of what became eleven A1 display boards, using NASA images to create visually attractive backgrounds. These were produced for us by Sanctus Media.

To view elements of the display see www.graspingthenettle.org/assets/docs/Crown_Church_Posters.pdf

Rev. Doug McRoberts (with previous experience as a broadcast news editor and communications director for the international nuclear and electricity generation industries) had a long-held ambition to produce a video on this topic. The resulting 20 minute presentation is both inspiring and professional.

A church elder focussed on the audience of children, and so prepared material on the theme of 'Light'.

Rev Dr Alistair Donald, chaplain to Heriot-Watt University and GTN Board Member, gave a lecture on the topic 'Is it OK to believe? Why science hasn't buried God'.

We learned of the booklet 'Look Well on these Skies', produced by Mayfield Salisbury Church of Scotland. It provides a more in-depth discussion of the topic than we had attempted in our display. Courtesy of the editor, Professor Douglas Blackwood, we offered the booklet to exhibition attendees. We also produced a short booklist

Advertising and Publicity

The event was advertised widely, not just to the churches, but also via the local research centres, Raigmore Hospital, GPs, community noticeboards and Facebook.

Our minister, Rev Peter Donald, brought the event into our Sunday worship, and invited Rev Doug McRoberts to preach.

Outcomes and Further Developments

Although the response to a preview, on the part of press and clergy, was disappointing, we were delighted to receive many positive comments from those who came (150 plus 25 children), praising the high quality of both the video and the display boards. We participated in some very interesting conversations, and were delighted by the range of opinions of those who came. The largest attendance was at the evening lecture when 90+ attended. Again the discussion and feedback were most encouraging.

Eleven people signed up to be kept in touch with future plans. Directors of some research projects are considering working with us to showcase their work in a future event.



Crown Church, Inverness, image by Dr Neil Clifton

Future Plans

We want to build on the momentum established, and will aim to have three occasions over the winter with a talk or possibly a video followed by a discussion, possibly preceded with some displays from local science research projects. Already some local churches have invited Rev Doug McRoberts to come and preach about faith and science. Our materials have now been requested elsewhere.

Sharing the Resources

If you would like to borrow the resource material (up to 11 A1 boards with or without stands and other items), free of charge, please contact eileenardern@hotmail.com. Alternatively write to: Faith and Science Team, Crown Church, Kingsmills Road, Inverness, IV2 3JT.

EXPLORING IN SCOTLAND

Grasping the Nettle in Scotland often begins with the Exploring the God Question series. In this edition of the Newsletter we bring you the experience of three session leaders from different parts of the country .

EXPLORING THE GOD QUESTION IN SUTHERLAND

GTN Council of Advisors member, Dr Alan Fraser, has been assisting churches in Sutherland in Exploring the God Question. Here he records his experience.

The Church of Scotland presbytery of Sutherland organised a day conference in Lairg, inviting the series Producer to present the Exploring the God Question programmes with suggestions for how they could be used in the rural setting of the North of Scotland. I was privileged to be present at that conference. Having delivered ETGQ three times in Ross-shire I offered to attend any small groups they might set up.



Exploring the God Question amidst the spectacular scenery of the West Highlands.

Personally I greatly enjoyed each session, appreciating the opportunity to present first class material on a vital subject for our times. It was good to meet with friendly people who were willing to go well outwith their comfort zones to try to reach their communities with the basic message that "God is". While most of those who attended were church goers, and they were disappointed not to draw in those with a strong secular bias, the event equipped us all to engage more confidently with any who struggle with belief in God and boosted the morale of local believers, giving them that sense of achievement which comes from attempting something difficult and succeeding.



Lairg in Sutherland: the location of the Presbytery Conference which initiated local interest in Exploring the God Question.

Their experience will be an encouragement to other rural communities in Sutherland and beyond. You don't have to be in a city to make such events happen.

A group representing sparsely populated parishes from Rosehall to Edderton met to consider how they could organise an event in Bonar Bridge when the ETGQ material would be the basis for an open discussion on the God question. Courageously and efficiently they booked the local community hall and sent out flyers and other publicity. For six consecutive weeks from 28th February we ran through the six sessions on the DVDs.

Attendances ranged from 9 to 15 with a total of more than 20 individuals participating. There was a 45 min discussion following the screening of each video. The first video came as a bit of a shock to some with its fast moving presentation of topics unfamiliar to most. As the weeks passed people became used to the format. Usually there was no lull in the discussion. At times it was a bit challenging to keep the discussion on track. There are so many opportunities to stray into side issues, most of which are of great importance.

DEVELOP YOUR UNDERSTANDING ABOUT SCIENCE AND GOD AT THE GTN ONLINE FORUM TABLES

Visit www.graspingthenettle.org/forum and get up to speed on either or both of the vitally important topics discussed at the online tables. Since early 2017, conversations have been taking place about 'Darwin, DNA and Divinity' – chaired by professor Chris Packard and 'Brain, Mind and Matters of the Soul' – chaired by Dr Antony Latham.

In both cases, it is time for a summary of the conversation so far before embarking on new aspects of the theme.

For the summary of the Darwin discussion to date click here http://www.graspingthenettle.org/assets/docs/DDD_summary_final_June_2017.pdf

Alternatively, visit the Forum. The 'Soul' summary will be available soon at the Forum table.

EXPLORING THE GOD QUESTION AT CALDERWOOD BAPTIST CHURCH

GTN Board Member Rev John MacKinnon explains his use of *Exploring the God Question* in East Kilbride



Rev John MacKinnon

In my role as a chaplain in the local secondary school I was recently asked by a first year pupil to explain how if we took a literal understanding of seven days of creation can that be reconciled with a lot of what is taught in the Science classroom. I was glad that I felt equipped to engage in a conversation about atheistic evolutionary views, theistic evolutionary views, intelligent design and young earth creationism and all of that on a Monday morning!

That sense of being equipped is because as a local Church we have both engaged with the various events run by the Grasping the Nettle initiative and are currently offering, in a repeating cycle within our Church life, an opportunity for both believers and non-believers to engage with the excellent material that is 'Exploring the God Question'.

The excellence has been affirmed by everyone participating in the course, regardless of their starting point, and the conversations that this course has catalysed have been informative, balanced and, despite differing opinion, have not slid into polarisation and antipathy. The educational benefits go beyond enabling our members and friends to be better informed. They further equip them to engage in rational ways with enquiring minds.

EXPLORING THE GOD QUESTION IN STEWARTON

Rev George Lind, a member of GTN Council of Advisors has organised various GTN activities in the Presbytery of Irvine and Kilmarnock. Here he writes about ETQG sessions organised for churches around Stewarton, Ayrshire

The fascinating *Exploring the God Question* DVD-led series has absorbed the attention of groups at St. Columba's Church Stewarton where we've run the programme twice. It has attracted people mainly from the congregation who wanted to think more deeply about the interface of faith and science. Both series took place on a 6-week run of Saturday mornings 10 – noon.

These have been exciting opportunities to engage the minds of folks wherever they are (or not) on the journey of faith. We attracted a fair number from within the congregation who have scientific backgrounds, among them a physicist, two biologists, a computer engineer, a civil engineer and the Minister whose only academic achievements in science are limited to O-levels (yes I'm *that* old) in botany and zoology. Lots of others came along too, including some of our Boys' Brigade senior section. Despite advertising widely, we did not attract along any atheists, and that was a pity, for we could have been really helped by their 'take' on how the series affected them.

Encouraging Outcomes

There were many really positive outcomes. One was the most sincere testimony of a young woman who had maintained a loose connection to the Church until she embarked on her scientific degree course. She quickly binned any religious belief, (wrongly) assuming 'science has the last word'. Engaging with this series has been part of her journey to a living faith in Christ – one she was not slow to share with the group at the end of the series. One course participant openly acknowledged that having 'joined the Church' elsewhere, 30 years previously, he had soon lost interest and ceased attending on a regular basis. However, it has been thanks to the Church's willingness to face head-on, issues like the faith/science dialogue that his commitment to the Christian faith and to regular Church attendance has been rekindled. These testimonies have underlined to me the great need for churches to engage *minds* as well as hearts.



Rev George Lind

The Power of Reasoning

In any congregation there are members and enquirers who find it difficult to settle for a low common denominator approach to the faith. Preachers notice right away the stir which can occur among their congregations at any mention of wider reading, including in the realms of science or philosophy. When we appeal to the intellect as well as to the heart, we are following the tradition of Christ himself who loved to make people *think*. Because of that, he rarely offered direct answers, preferring rather to tease from his hearers a reasoned response to the challenges of faith. *Exploring the God Question* offers exactly this opportunity – a reasoned response.

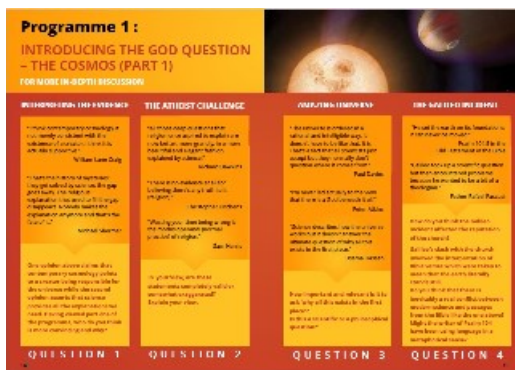
Another blessing was the willingness of other Churches to send along members as ‘scouts’ so that they, having had a taste of the series can run one for themselves.



St Columba's Church, Stewarton

Incorporating the Local Secondary School

One great encouragement in the area has been the Head of RE in Stewarton Academy agreeing to run the schools version (Introducing the God Question, www.thegodquestion.tv/introduce) as part of her teaching programme with 3rd year pupils, among whom there will be many who have no allegiance to any faith group. Stewarton Church paid for the course materials and we'll soon be hearing how this recently-run series was received.



ETGQ Study Guide

Customising the Resource

The bibliography in the Companion Guide is most helpful (I prefer that term to ‘Study Guide’). I expanded the reading list by adding some helpful easy-to-read books and booklets along with suggested web-sites. It sure helps when you know the people who’re coming along and what might reach them best in their own enquiries at home.

Producer Visit

A real coup was to have the series Producer along for a specially convened ‘Unit 7’. He spoke to us about what had inspired him to embark on the project, why he had selected the interviewees and what feed-back he had had, world-wide. He was challenged by a fair number of us on the content and pitch of certain aspects the course. Our guest held his ground well, listening and speaking with us most engagingly.

Spreading the Influence and Impact

The final major plus point was having two elders make a special visit so that they might report back to the Kirk Session. They were hugely impressed and among various recommendations was one whereby the congregation purchase a stock of materials to be placed in our Church Lending Library, allowing members the chance to *Explore the God Question* at home with family and friends. One of my final projects before I retired recently was to purchase more box-sets of the DVDs and a batch of Companion Guides. This means the work can go on from strength to strength without being ‘minister-led’ within the life and witness of the congregation and community.

One way of talking up the series is to do as we did in the Irvine/Kilmarnock area by pulling together a group of Churches over a ‘taster’ evening with representatives of GTN/The God Question. With the availability of excerpts from the series, well-pitched explanations, a question and answer session and a sales table of resources, it makes for a great evening of focussed fellowship and I strongly recommend this kind of awareness-raising event to all.

When you go public on this kind of thing, be prepared for approaches from folk with not always positive ‘takes’ on the science/faith dialogue. For example, I was sent, anonymously, a little tract spelling out the evils of any engagement with the subject of Evolution. I should have preferred a direct approach and for the sender to come along and contribute to what we were exploring together. The sender would have found a safe place to engage in respectful dialogue, which is exactly what our group of *explorers* encountered throughout the whole experience. Go for it!

THE SOUL OF SCIENCE and the HEART OF RELIGION

The GTN National Conference 2017

March 2017 saw the second Grasping the Nettle national conference, again held in the plush facilities of Woodhill Church in Bishopbriggs, Glasgow. Whereas in 2016 the theme had focussed on a 'defending the faith' perspective against the assertion that science dismisses God, the 2017 conference moved a step further in opening up the question of what more we learn when science and theology come together in constructive dialogue.

The subtext, represented by the choice of two female plenary speakers, spoke clearly of the GTN commitment to achieve better gender balance than is traditionally the case in church circles.

In her first of two presentations, Dr Bethany Sollereder of Oxford University, addressed the challenging issue of God, Darwin and the problem of suffering while in her next talk she provided a masterly analysis of perspectives on creation and human origins. Her outline paper was much appreciated as a helpful summary of the various identifiable perspectives.



Both presentations by doctoral candidate Sarah Lane Ritchie focussed on issues of the soul - especially in relation to the latest information in neurobiology.

Proving a most challenging - and at times controversial - subject much of the ensuing discussion was about whether the soul is a completely separate entity from the brain or integrally linked to it. Is it immortal and therefore survives physical death or is it that part of a human being that God reconstitutes in eternity? Much to ponder!

Perhaps the responses to the conference were expertly summed up by one delegate when he said *"Well, that was a great experience! Was I in a comfort zone – no! Was I out of my depth – yes! Did I understand and learn – yes! Did I agree with the two Key Speakers – yes and no! ... I discovered that I was a dualist, and that I fit best as a Progressive Creationist."*

A spokesman for the organisers commented "Grasping the Nettle can be attempted at a number of different levels. A conference that majorly challenges us intellectually is an important component in the wide menu of activities of GTN. However it remains only a part of what GTN tries to achieve; part of a diaspora of different approaches for widely varying audiences".



Seminar Presenter Dr Andy Bannister engaging the greatly appreciative audience.

In addition to plenary sessions, delegates had the opportunity to attend two out of five seminars on related themes.



A packed seminar room for 'Brain, Mind and Matters of the Soul' with Dr Antony Latham.

HAVE YOU GRASPED THE NETTLE WITH EXPLORING THE GOD QUESTION IN YOUR COMMUNITY?



Across the country, churches are benefiting from taking a clear and hard look at why science adds a solid ring of confidence to the Christian belief in the existence of a creator. In many churches, Exploring the God Question is part of a pattern of giving congregations and communities recurring opportunities to address big questions - similar to the way Alpha is used to re-visit fundamental issues of Christian faith with new and developing audiences. If you have yet to grasp the nettle in this way, visit www.thegodquestion.tv/explore and acquire your resources in 'store'.

INTRODUCING THE GOD QUESTION IN SCOTLAND'S SCHOOLS

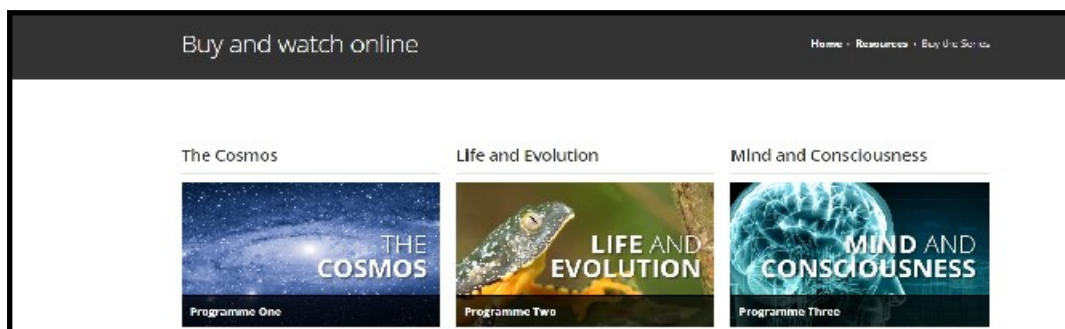
In autumn 2016 'Introducing the God Question' was released as a resource for schools in Scotland as well as in the rest of the UK. The material is also designed for the International Baccalaureate. Can you introduce your local high school to this resource ready to integrate with the Curriculum for Excellence? Visit www.thegodquestion.tv/introduce



NEW ONLINE FACILITY

From 1st August the Exploring the God Question will not only be available on DVD with printed study guide and leader's manual but will be accessible online.

Commenting on this new facility, Search for Truth board member John Hunter said "We need to recognise that young people especially are 'online' consumers"; some don't even have access to DVD players. This new version will help us extend the youth audience especially.' Users of the platform will be able to make their purchase in pounds, dollars or euros.



HOLYROOD POSTPONEMENT

Please note the national GTN Holyrood event planned for 19th September 2017, in the Scottish parliament building, has been postponed. It is proposed to hold it at a later date.

NEED HELP TO EXPLORE THE GOD QUESTION?

Help is immediately to hand! A number of scientists associated with Grasping the Nettle have thoughtfully offered their services. For information contact office@graspingthenettle.org