



**SCIENTISTS IN CONGREGATIONS PROJECT
AUTUMN 2016**

PROJECT ETHOS

There are two reasons why it is important for every congregation to grow in their understanding of the relationship between science and faith:

1. It is important for discipleship.

True discipleship is whole-life discipleship. As Jesus' followers, we are learning how to connect faith in Jesus with every area of life. The New Testament claims that all things were created by him and for him. The claim that "Jesus is Lord" therefore relates to every sphere of human endeavour, and it is incumbent on every church to seek to help its members work out what it means to live the whole of their lives under the Lordship of Christ.

This is not without its challenges. Many Christians operate with a dualistic mind-set, drawing a sharp distinction between the "sacred" and the "secular", or the "spiritual" and the "natural". This mind-set is often especially prevalent among Christians working in the sciences. Many find it difficult to make the connections between living Christ-centred lives and working within a scientific paradigm. Other Christians drift into the sciences unthinkingly: it's not that they find it difficult to make these connections; it's just that they've never really tried.

The first reason, therefore, why it's important to engage with science and faith in a congregational setting is to help equip members of the congregation to live and work as faithful followers of Jesus.

2. It is important for mission.

We are called to be missional disciples. In a society that is increasingly post-Christian, effective witness necessitates every Christian and every church community becoming more skilled in apologetics, and a crucial aspect of this is learning to engage with science and faith. This can be illustrated by taking Alister McGrath's understanding of apologetics:

- *Defending the faith*: even though the "new atheism" is no longer grabbing the headlines in the way it once was, many people in our society are living with the assumption that science and faith are in conflict, and that a scientific worldview is more intellectually rigorous than the Christian worldview. Christians need to be better equipped to deal with these misconceptions.
- *Commending the faith*: far from conflicting with science, the Christian worldview resonates with it deeply. Again, Christians need to be able to demonstrate why this is so.
- *Translating the faith*: The language we use to communicate the Christian message needs to be understandable by our audience. If the gospel is to make sense to the scientific community, Christians need to become skilled at using the language of this community.

The second reason, therefore, why it's important to engage with science and faith in a congregational setting is to help equip members of the congregation to be faithful witnesses to Jesus.

SPECIFIC APPLICATION OF THESE ISSUES TO GRACE CHURCH

We are currently reviewing our priorities as a church in light of the fact that we will soon be planting a new congregation in a new town. The process of planting a new church provides us with a fine opportunity to re-evaluate and renew the vision of the sending congregation.

A key part of this re-evaluation process involves us considering how we treat missional discipleship as the organising function of the church. Every part of church life is being considered with this priority in view, although the proposal that follows focuses specifically on our public Sunday gatherings and online presence.

Grace Church is a diverse congregation which includes many people who work in the sciences. Through our members, we are presented with numerous opportunities to engage with members of the wider community who are involved in the sciences in some shape or form.

PROJECT SUMMARY

We will run a series of live interviews on Sunday mornings with members of the church who work in the sciences and have thought hard about their faith connects with their work. These interviews will be quite short (around 7 minutes or so) and illustrate our conviction that faith in Christ is not only for Sunday mornings, but affects the way we live the whole of our lives.

We will then produce high-quality video interviews with these people, which will be included on a newly revamped church website. The purpose of these videos will be to engage with a wider audience outside the church. These videos will have an apologetics thrust (see above), but their primary purpose will be to invite people to come and enter into dialogue with us about questions of faith.

Rather than being a stand-alone project, the Scientists in Congregations project fits with, and extends, the Grace Church leaders' goal of refining the vision of the church for the next season, and designing a new church website.

PROJECT'S KEY QUESTIONS

- How can I be a science professional and still live a life centred on Jesus?
- What difference does having faith in Jesus make to a Christian working in the sciences?
- Is there a conflict between science and faith?
- How do the sciences inspire and energise faith?
- How can we take steps forward in being a church that welcomes dialogue, debate, and even disagreement over questions of science and faith?

PROJECT OUTPUTS AND OUTCOMES

Activities:

- Live interviews on Sunday mornings with members of the church who work in the sciences
- Follow-up, longer interviews with these same individuals in more of a "studio environment"
- Re-design of the church website with the "end-user" in mind – i.e. primary focus is people outside the church, but we also want the website to be an effective resource for church members

Outputs:

- High-quality videos of the "studio" interviews

- New church website that is more effectively geared up to communicate our faith to people outside the church

Outcomes:

- *Whole-life discipleship:* members of the church helped to appreciate how faith in Jesus connects with area of life. Scientists in the congregation given particular encouragement and help in seeing the relevance of their faith for the work that they do.
- *Mission:* People outside of the church helped to see that Grace Church is a community of people serious about grounding faith in real life. They come to a clearer appreciation of how science and faith are complementary, and are encouraged to question their ongoing response to Jesus.

Andrew Sampson, August 2016