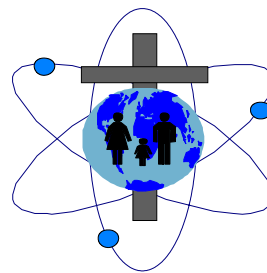


# SRT BULLETIN

Society, Religion and Technology  
Project

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Church of Scotland

## Kirk Involved in GM Crops Debate

GM crops and food are back in the news as the Government opens a public consultation on whether we should now grow GM crops commercially in the UK. The formal launch is on June 3, (June 11 in Scotland, in Glasgow) and lasts until mid-July. Anyone can hold meetings to discuss the issues and gather views from any part of civil society. Official materials have been prepared which attempt to lay out the issues as a basis for discussion. A special feedback form poses 13 questions to which the views of citizens are sought. This form will be available at the launches and on a website. SRT is involved with this process at two levels.

### **Churches can play a role**

One of our concerns is to make it easy for ordinary people to have their say rather than just the voices of "the usual suspects". SRT would like to help local churches to play a role in this consultation by holding events in the churches. We are now contacting a number of churches which may have interests in the subject. The idea would be to invite local people to a presentation of the pro's and con's of GM crops, as impartially as possible, to highlight some of the key areas of controversy, and ask them for their own views. Would your church like to host a GM discussion?

### **DEMOCS Game**

SRT is also working with the New Economics Foundation to produce a card game called Democs to help people to join the national consultation in their own homes, without needing 'experts'. It aims to enable any group of people - family, friends, church house group or the Guild - to discuss GM crops and feed back their views on the 13 questions into the main debate. If you're interested in playing the game, please contact SRT.



## Nobel Laureate Criticises Gene Commercialisation

### **SRT Science Festival Event**

"We need ways of conducting research and development that are not purely market-driven." Nobel laureate Sir John Sulston was speaking at an SRT event at the Edinburgh Science Festival in April. Sir John recently retired as Director of the Sanger Centre where a large part of the human genome map was plotted. He argued that the system in which genetic research is done is too commercially driven. Pressures on companies to raise share prices or to maximise the scope of their patents may not act in the common good. The current system can encourage blockbuster anti-depressant drugs while sidelining genetic disease research, if there was little profit interest. "I think

there's every case for saying that we should swing back the pendulum and increase public research. I think we'll get more out, more cheaply."

### **Gene patents holding back research**

He criticised patents which went beyond their legitimate scope. A breast cancer gene patent claimed rights over all tests for the gene and all other uses found for it. It gave a monopolistic ownership of something which was not an invention but a discovery. It is also preventing a lot of lines of future research. He agreed with the Kirk's criticism of a gold rush mentality on both sides of the Atlantic. "All the messages coming out of the human genome say that it's a collective thing." We should keep it that way.

## Eco-Congregation wins Funding from Scottish Executive

### **Key National Role for Churches**

The SRT Project and the Keep Scotland Beautiful organisation have won funding from the Scottish Executive for the Scottish Eco-Congregation Programme, under its Sustainable Action Grants. This continues the affirmation by Government after the Jo'burg Summit of the Church's role in helping to promote grassroots environmental good practice in Scotland. The church is present in every community in the land. Eco-Congregation seeks to show that the gospel of Jesus Christ can turn good intentions about care for God's creation into practical effect in our local churches & communities. Many churches are now making environmental audits of their life, worship, premises & activities, and are taking action. St. John's Hamilton have just earned an Eco-Congregation award. We encourage you to join in!

### **Regional Workshops**

How can you do this? The funding will allow us to plan a series of workshops to introduce and promote the programme to churches: in Dundee in June; the Borders, East Lothian, Pollock, Orkney and Inverness in the autumn; in the Kilmarnock, East Renfrew, Dunfermline and Stirling areas in Spring 2004. More immediately there's a workshop in Edinburgh on 29 May at Barclay church and in Dalbeattie on 16 June.

### **New, Simpler Church Checkup**

For further details of these, or just to find out about the scheme, contact Victoria Beale, SRT's Assistant Director. She co-ordinates the programme for all the churches in Scotland together with Margaret Warnock at Keep Scotland Beautiful. We now have a new audit form to help a congregation to assess its environmental impact in a simple way. We also encourage churches who've inquired to take the plunge and order resource modules and begin to make a difference for the better in God's world!

## The Search for Human Perfection

50 years after the structure of DNA was discovered, what are the limits of human potential? What are we aiming for if we enhance our bodies or our genes? These were the themes of a packed SRT event at the Royal Society of Edinburgh during the Edinburgh Science Festival. Top geneticist Prof. David Porteous laid out the potential of the human genome project to identify genetic elements of disease and for gene therapy. But to realise the benefits and avoid the harms of genetics requires an ongoing dialogue in society. Citizens, doctors, scientists, government

### **The Perfect Body?**

Sports scientist Dr Arthur Stewart gave a fascinating account of notions of human bodily perfection in ancient and contemporary society. There is some scientific basis for a good physique but he argued that we are more preoccupied with how we look than how healthy we are. The images we use in art, dolls and mannequins create ideals of male and female proportions that may be infertile or biologically impossible. Even the pursuit of the perfect sporting physique can lead to athletes who are not necessarily healthy. Sport can distort the body image. The 'perfect physique' is the one *you* have during a long, healthy and active life, he concluded.

### **Has Genetic Perfection missed the point?**

SRT Director Donald Bruce argued that a strand of modern genetics is pursuing a dangerous illusion of human perfection. Looking at the human being as genes can easily lead to a functional view, with one standard of normality, which excludes defects, and stigmatises the disabled. We need to keep hold of a wider concept of our humanity. We should also draw a firm ethical line between justifiable medical treatment and attempts at personal genetic enhancement. Although mostly impractical, these would be a source of profound social inequities whose very idea of humanness is misconceived. In focusing on individual perfection it misses the vital biblical insights of relationality and moral fallenness. No amount of genetic or physical enhancement will solve our basic human and social problems or help our deepest relationships. What is really important is who we are morally and spiritually. Indeed for Christians the perfect human was Jesus, called the man of sorrows. Against the eugenic rhetoric of a few geneticists or a success orientation of some views of human medicine, a Christian understanding is realistic about humanity and can provide a better view of the place of suffering and mortality.

## **Nanotechnology : SRT at Royal Institution**

Scientists are finding ways to manipulate devices on ever smaller scales, which has given rise to the name nanotechnology. It is a label for a wide range of potential technology applications which could work at the molecular level. These vary from light materials stronger than steel, to bio-motors which could deliver life-saving doses of a drug to individual cells affected by a disease. Most applications are still in the far future. Many may be more sci-fi than reality, like a self-replicating 'Grey-Goo' of one over-imaginative book. But some more mundane uses are already in view.

### **SRT Involvement**

For SRT this is just the moment, therefore, to ask questions about the ethical and social implications. SRT Director Dr Bruce has briefed a committee of the Biotechnology Research Council on this aspect and at their invitation addressed a debate at the Royal Institution in London in March. The text of the talk will shortly be on SRT's website. We'll keep you updated on further issues in the field

## **ECEN Assembly**

*Water - Gift of God, Source of Life* was the theme of the 4<sup>th</sup> Assembly of the European Christian Environment Network (ECEN) in Volos, Greece, 6-11 May. Church reps from 22 European countries from Protestant, Orthodox and Catholic traditions discussed the urgency of the global ecological crisis and sought to encourage new responses from the churches and wider society. Delegates also heard a report on the Johannesburg World summit which SRT helped draft.

### **Sharing Creation Care in Europe**

Smaller working groups also discussed sustainable development, climate change and other issues. SRT Assistant Director Victoria Beale shared her experience of co-ordinating Eco-Congregation in Scotland. She helped to prepare a report for the Conference of European Churches which introduces the concept of church Environmental Management, illustrated with stories of good practice. ECEN demonstrates the concern and action for the environment shared by churches across Europe. It is a positive demonstration of ecumenical co-operation contribute to the sustainability of God's earth.

## **Euro-vote against Stem Cells unlikely to be Upheld**

In April the papers reported that the European Parliament had voted against the use of embryos as a source of stem cells for research into therapies for degenerative diseases. In 2001 both Houses of the the UK Parliament voted by large majorities to allow research. The MEPs vote made a controversial amendment to an EC Directive about technical measures to ensure the safety of tissue transplants. SRT conversations with the Parliament rapporteur, the UK Government, and European observers indicate that the MEP's vote is unlikely to be upheld as the Directive proceeds through its complex EU stages. Ethical issues on health are normally for member states to determine, so Europe is not expected to be judged 'competent' legally to overrule the UK Parliament.

## **SRT Associates**

The SRT Trust exists to raise funds to help support SRT's core work and to expand into major new projects. The SRT Associates scheme enables people to be kept more closely in touch with SRT's ongoing work via regular mailings of our reports, papers, talks, etc. We also want to widen the base of our work, drawing on advice and relevant skills of Associates. We will shortly send a new mailing and are planning an event for Associates. To find out more contact SRT.

## **SRT and Your Needs**

SRT is the Kirk's mission to the world of science, technology and environment. It's also an ecumenical resource for all the churches in Scotland, and further afield, to help you know and address the issues raised by today's developments. The SRT Bulletin aims to inform and to provide thought provoking articles for use in parish magazines or elsewhere. We just ask you to acknowledge SRT as the source. Tell us what you find useful! **For More Information ...**

Look at our extensive **Worldwide Web pages**. We have **Information Sheets** on issues like cloning, stem cells, GM crops and their ecological impact, GM animals, patenting, Eco-Congregation, SRT's environmental work and energy saving. More are in preparation. Write fax, e-mail or phone for our publications list. Our office in John Knox House has books on a range of subjects to browse. And if you know someone who'd like a copy of this newsletter, let us know!

SRT is a Church of Scotland project of the Board of National Mission, a member of Action of Churches Together in Scotland, supported by the Scottish Episcopal, United Reformed & United Free Churches. Director: Donald Bruce; Assistant Director: Victoria Beale; Admin: Sheila Mutch

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