



Awake in God's world – learning through disorientation leading to reimagination

Jack Barentsen & Oeds Blok, BCC 2025, Parallel session June 2, 2025

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Welcome

Welcome to all of you. We are looking forward to learn together. In this workshop we focus on the practice of deep listening and making a safe haven for conversation. We explore learning in God's mission through the experience of disorientation. This uneasy learning often is – to our surprise – the birthplace of new imagination. The theme of our conference, 'Witnessing to a New Heaven and a New Earth' asks for reimagination of the Believers Church here and now.

We will start with an introduction of the posture of being 'awake in God's world'. After that we share some stories about disorientation leading to reimagination. There will be space for the stories of all of us in an exercise. We will listen to some of these stories and will conclude with an invitation and appeal.

Our Journey

But first something about our personal journey. We both come from a Reformed background, finding home in the Believers Church (local Baptist Church and tradition). Both of us have pioneering experiences of Believers Church in the world. Oeds with the Neighbourhood Church in the centre of the Netherlands and Jack with church planting in the South of the Netherlands.

Awake in God's world

In the 20th century the approach of *missio Dei* developed in the worldwide church. It was a correction of an ecclesiocentric approach of mission, which placed the church in the centre (Johannes C. Hoekendijk, *De kerk binnenste buiten*). Mission is the redeeming mission of God in the world, God the Father, Jesus the Son in his life, his death and resurrection, in and through the Holy Spirit. The church has the privilege of participating in Gods hopeful mission.

What posture do we need to participate in God’s mission? Jesus points the way for our participation in his life. He says: “My Father is always at his work to this very day, and I too am working.” And He continues: “Very truly I tell you, the Son can do nothing by himself; He can do only what He sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does.” (John 5:17-19)

As children of the Father we can find safety in the world in the love of our Father. This safety allows us to be still and to discern together what God is doing and to discern harm and evil in ourselves and in creation. We can join in with what God is doing, in a posture of stillness and movement (Simon P. Walker, *The Undefended Life*). This is what we call being ‘awake in God’s world’, to be mindful and attentive (Clemens Sedmak, *Doing Local Theology: A Guide for Artisans of a New Humanity*), with ‘open eyes and open ears’, hopefully present in daily life.

This posture involves the practice of deep listening to God in reality, in Scripture and in tradition as a communal practice of the followers of Christ, with the help of the Spirit. In our book *Wakker in Gods wereld: kerk-zijn in de 21^e eeuw* [ET: *Awake in God’s World: Being Church in the 21st Century*] we designed a missional learning cycle to join God in his mission, starting with *attitude* (awake, trust, learning), to *sources* (place as a gift, the multicoloured gospel, gifts starting with Christ as gift and people as gift), to *practices* (community, worship, mission and leadership).



Paying attention to learning we observe that God often works through ‘uneasy learning’. In education science researchers speak about ‘deep learning in a disorienting world’, ‘constructive disorientation’ (Jon Wergin, *Deep Learning in a Disorienting World*) and ‘disruption inclusion’ (Jennifer Smith, ‘What prevents Christian Adults from learning?’). An

example happened during Covid time. Many pastors said: 'God is in control. Things will be right.' There was not much courage to embrace the disorientation and go for deep learning. Only when many people did not return to church after Covid, uneasiness and a sense of disorientation was felt. But many churches returned to 'business as usual', continuing with what was 'normal'. Here safety was offered in appeasing the covid panic and business as usual.

However, safe havens are needed to learn together in uneasy situations. This safe environment with support and some guidance is needed for people in order not to be overwhelmed by anxiety. Then not much learning will take place. From the Bible we can find assurance that God is present and at work in disorientation and disruption, for instance in the disturbing times of the exile. Here, reimagination can foster new understanding of the Jesus way and of Christian community.

Stories of disorientation and reimagination

Holy water (Oeds)

One evening a family asked me to come and clean their house with holy water. They sensed a negative influence in the house. The next day I visited them with a woman of our team. I knew the family through our games-nights for children. Their children liked to come there.

The woman and man are very direct. We came in and immediately they were shaking hands. But it was Covid-time!! They welcomed us very warmly with a large piece of apple pie with a good amount of whipped cream. We heard about family problems. They told us that they had visited a fortune-teller. It was an open conversation, beautiful but unsettling in a way. An experience of disorientation. Since sprinkling holy water was not in my tradition (apart from using water in baptism)! I was very direct with them, telling about Jesus who had been given all power. I talked about the choice to trust Him. We put holy water on the door (the place they had chosen for the holy water) in the shape of a cross and I prayed for them.

For me this experience of disorientation is an example of reimagining Christian faith in our neighbourhood. In our neighbourhood Christian faith is done and experienced, not so much discussed. So holy water is fitting very well! There was exchange, mutuality, dialogue and bold sharing of the good news of Jesus in a way that surprised me. This greater focus on doing and experiencing Christian faith has been a gift for me and others in the neighbourhood.

Mixed group

Another example happens around our Sunday service in the small building on a playground. We gather in the afternoon in a mixed group with Christians and non-Christians. There is dialogue around the Bible. The question comes up: should we correct people's views in the service? In the early years of our pioneering church it was hard for us as Christians to make safe space to talk openly about this question. I think we were afraid to have different opinions.

This experience of disorientation led us in time to a process of reimagining safe space to explore faith in and around the service, trusting Christ in the middle. Somebody said: "Oeds says I can believe in my own way." And yes, this freedom of conscience is a good thing.

Together with all active participants we come together every year in a 'making plans evening'. So we share responsibility in where we go as a community. Through open conversation it became clear that people don't learn about faith in a course, but, as someone said: "We learn about faith in daily life." What we see happening in different lives is life-orientation on Christ in our community and in personal lives, trusting God's Spirit. In a way it looks messy but relationships grow. Someone mentions the process of taking 'baby steps' in faith and the lady who said that she can believe in her own way shared that she had found 'the love of Jesus'. Some others share that they are not believers and this is respected as well.

A rummage sale (Jack)

Early in our ministry, we were frustrated that our evangelism didn't result in people even visiting our church. We then look around and realize many groups, sport clubs and other organizations were organizing rummage sales – usually for the extra finances. So we decided to do the same. It was an evangelistic rummage sale. We were right away surprised that the whole church could participate: picking up stuff, setting up, bartering over prices, serving coffee, clean-up, etc. It wasn't just for the very vocal church members. We were also surprised that we actually earned money doing evangelism. For the next year, we found a charity for which to collect money: to help gypsies in Bulgaria through the winter. Before next year's rummage sale, we went door to door. And many people were quite sympathetic. Yes, they had something we could sell. In later years they even began asking when the sale was, because they had stuff waiting for us. And then they asked why we did it for these gypsies. This brought a whole new set of connections and relationships. It was still fairly traditional, not too disorienting: we adapted in order to communicate better, but it was the beginning of reimagining church.

Many years later, with our local Baptist church, we were looking once again for the next place of worship, since the location that we had used cancelled our rental contract. We ended up worshipping in Catholic church building. Imagine a Baptist worship service in a building with a huge altar and statues of Mary on the wall! But then we did questionnaire in the neighbourhood to find out people's social or religious needs. We even applied for and received subsidy from the city to host activities for lonely or poorer people in the neighbourhood, like a course on how handle your anger, or how to raise children. We even organized a breakfast once a month during the church service. We were beginning to learn not just how to reach the neighbourhood, but how to partner with them and the city, another episode of reimagining the church's relationship with our environment.

Again many years later, our typical leadership style was disrupted when we tried to deal with questions about female leadership in the church. We quickly discovered that our traditional strategies – do a few Bible studies and determine what God was saying – wouldn't work, because we noticed many conservative churches, whom we respected for their commitment to the Scriptures, had great difficulty in arriving at one unanimous, united conclusion. We also realized that church members already had different opinions about the issue, and that we could not identify a process that would make everybody come to the same conclusion. Yet, we sensed how the Lord brought us together as community, so we didn't want to divide or lose people over whatever process and outcome might result. The story is too long to tell

in detail, but it is clear that we had to reimagine and reinvent our leadership strategies for the church.

Each story tells of frustrations, or surprising events, or difficult issues that were disorienting. They disrupted our familiar ways of functioning. In these contexts, we couldn't just continue as usual, so we had to face the disorientation and adapt through reimagining our way of doing church and experimenting with new forms.

Awake in God's world – your local context

We took time in groups of three persons for the following questions.

- Where or when have you experienced constructive disorientation in your congregation?
- What happens? A quick fix or a learning process? Deep listening? Is there safe space for conversation? What is God doing and teaching you? Do you see reimagination happening?

Three examples came forward in the plenary conversation.

Ukraine

In Ukraine in wartime a massive amount of people need help from the church. There was stress for the Christian workers. One of the workers asked someone in need: "Are you a Christian?" Reflecting on this question it became clear that it was the stress of the situation that made this question come up. But it didn't feel right, because they wanted to help unconditionally, not only if someone was a Christian. It was a moment of self-reflection, disorientation and transformation. The reimagination that happened was a vision of witness regardless of labels. And that this still is a choice to be made in different circumstances.

Frankfurt, Germany

A church was reflecting on the theme of hospitality. They became aware that they wanted to show hospitality to people but not to refugees. This unsettling truth made them think and gave a new vision for hospitality not in the sense of 'what we can get out of this' but just freely.

Ohio, USA

The board of a church in Ohio had run 'like usual' for decades. Some younger people, who participated in the church but not as regularly as the older generation, wanted to have some more "fun" activities. That didn't seem to fit the normal mould, one doesn't just do things to have fun, but to serve God, the church and others. However, these younger people were allowed to start a 'fun committee'. This caused much uneasiness, because it disrupted their normal systems of committees, boards and serving the church and the world. Surprisingly, this extra committee changed the whole idea of committees, who was worthy to be on a committee, how the church should function, and what it meant to serve.

Awake in God's world – an invitation and appeal to the Believers Church

Our theme is 'Witnessing to a New Heaven and a New Earth'. In Revelation 7 we see "A great multitude that no one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language, standing before the throne and before the Lamb. They were wearing white robes and were holding palm branches in their hands. And they cried out in a loud voice: "Salvation belongs to our God, who sits on the throne, and to the Lamb." (Revelation 7:9-10)

In the troubled times of the Roman Empire and its powers this is a vision of a 'reconciled diversity' (Bert Hoedemaker, *Never-Ending Prayer: A Case for the Christian Tradition*). It is a vision of 'unity in diversity' in trusting God and the gift of Christ. This vision is an invitation and appeal to us in a divided world and often divided church to live out 'reconciled diversity' today as churches of Jesus Christ.

We have seen in the examples that this journey may be unsettling in different situations, but that we can learn together and receive new imagination in acting out of faith in God.

The communal practice of deep listening to reality, to Scripture, and to tradition asks for leadership that is able to maintain safe havens for conversation. These safe havens are a sign of hope in the world.

"May you be children of your Father in heaven. He causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good, and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous." (Matthew 5:45)