



Oase
Bergen

Together

What does it look like to come together in a 1.5-metre society?

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Foreword

These days are not what we expected. The 1.5 meter society is here and who can say when it will definitively be behind us?

We are now 2 months further and even though we hope for a return to the "old normal", we are in a new situation. That will be our "new normal" for the time being.

The sooner we accept it the better it will be for us. The biggest question now is: "Is your God big enough to withstand a 1.5 meter society?" Our generation will not look to heaven to answer this question. They will look to His church for the answer, to His representatives, His witnesses on earth.

As Christians, we believe that our Father will not forsake us, that He will always take care of us. But what about His church? Is there a place for the " gathering of believers " at a time when we are advised to avoid larger gatherings? Is there enough room to be together in the 1.5 meter society, both literally and figuratively?

I believe there is. What follows is a proposal; what that could look like for the Oase Bergen congregation.

What we've learned so far

We went to a 100% online model for the first time on March 18, 2020¹. At that time the measure would last until the 6th of April, so there was a small hope that we could get back together after 3 weeks. In hindsight that hope, small as it was, was quite naive. With the start of the 100% online model a lot had to change. The Sunday meeting had to be held at a distance. The Loft had to be converted into a livestream and recording studio. Leadership and staff meetings had to become online meetings. A pastoral care plan had to be set up quickly. We were no longer a congregation that would see each other regularly. We no longer had the luxury of being able to ask each other at least once a week, "how are you?" It would have been very convenient if we'd all lived close to each other. Then we could have met on the street or at the supermarket. Suddenly we had to learn as a community to stay connected from a distance.

This has not been easy, although it could have been much more difficult. The measures taken in the Netherlands have not been as strict as those in other countries. Still, we had to shift gears. And we had to learn

¹ Kijk naar die uitzending op: <https://subspla.sh/hh44mkx>

to live with the tension between keeping connected and keeping a distance, between human contact and caring for one's own health and that of the other.

I am proud of our congregation. I see how we have remained connected despite the distance. In fact, I notice that there is now a new depth in our connectedness, which God has produced through this crisis, for which I am thankful.

This pandemic has taught us something.

1. Don't underestimate the impact of a pandemic

On March 8th I stood in front of the congregation on a Sunday morning and shared between my sermon that if we ever got into a lockdown situation, we would continue with 100% livestream services. We laughed a bit about that, as if we were saying, "that certainly won't happen in the Netherlands".² Only 10 days later things had deteriorated so fast that we did in fact go to the 100% online model. And we were hoping that we could get back together within 3 weeks. While I am writing this we are in week 9.

We should not underestimate the impact of a pandemic. Of course we want to go back to "normal" but, as a flyer in the region makes clear, "not finding it normal, is the new normal".

The impact of the pandemic is not only visible in the measures that have been put in place. You can see its influence in many different areas:

- on our fears and thoughts about our own lives,

² Deze mededeling kun je zien op minuut 3:50 hier: <https://subspl.a.sh/bkwsxb5>

- on socially acceptable behaviour (shaking hands, groups of 4 or more, etc.) ,
- on how we're legally allowed to get together,
- on what it means to be a good citizen.

This pandemic has turned the whole world upside down in a very short time. People who want to predict what it will or won't look like in the coming months have yet to learn this lesson. Furthermore, if we want to make plans for the short and long term future, we have to keep this lesson in mind.

2. A congregation whose members live aloof from each other is a vulnerable congregation

In Oase, many of us don't live in the same neighborhood, not even in the same city or the same village. We only see each other on Sundays. This makes us vulnerable as a congregation. We don't see each other in the normal course of life. We only meet by appointment. When we do meet, we often talk about a "subject" and not about our lives, how we are, our dreams, our obstacles, etc. A congregation whose members only see each other at Sunday gatherings and the occasional Bible study evening runs the risk that their relationships will become thin and superficial. Relationships are the nervous system of the body of Christ. This pandemic has brought this fact to the forefront.

Once the physical Sunday meetings were canceled, we all started reaching out to each other more intentionally via WhatsApp, Zoom, phone, mail, etc. In the app groups we started to share much more with each other, videos, pictures and encouraging words. Parents and their children made videos and photos about the Sunday lesson material.

The Leadership Council started sending regular messages to church members to show love and attention and people shared prayer requests with each other through the weekly Oasis Makers Update and the chat on the Sunday morning live stream.

These are good, healthy movements for our church. But let's keep in mind, God has called us together after all. He has given us to each other! We have reach out to each other more and more and find ways to be together physically, even outside of Sundays³. Let us not forget this lesson or let these new, healthy rhythms be relaxed at the same time as the corona measures. Let's put new, fresh energy into Sunday meetings. Let us also look beyond Sunday to see how we can strengthen this vulnerable side of our congregation.

3. The work of pastoral care must be carried out by the whole congregation

Biblically it is a strange situation when most of the pastoral care in a congregation is left to 1 or 2 people. But in fact that is what is expected of many church leaders.

But this pandemic has shown us that if the relational ties in the congregation are strong, the needs and requests for help quickly come to the surface. The effort is shared more broadly, picked up faster and implemented better than if it were only in the work portfolio of 1 or 2 people.

The Leadership Council has picked up most of this work over the last few months and they have done an excellent job. My heartfelt thanks and respect for that!

³ <https://subspla.sh/pm43vkj>

Let us, as a congregation, also look at how we can expand the work of pastoral care even further. Let it be said of us just as it was said of the very first congregation: "there was no one among them who needed anything." (Acts 4:34)

4. A weekly update adds something important to the interconnectivity of the community

During this period, we added a weekly Oasis Makers Update to the church calendar to keep people informed of developments during that week and to encourage them. These contact moments, even if only through the livestream, have added something to the community's connectedness. It also offers the opportunity to address the congregation in a different setting.

5. Digital ways of getting together have added value

Before this pandemic, there were several Bible studies, conversations or meetings that could not be attended because of the distance from our homes, the limited time we have, the limited availability of both parents or for health reasons.

This pandemic has shown us that even when we get back together, the obstacles of distance, babysitting, time, and health do not have to remain obstacles. We must continue to use the technology we used in this pandemic. This is another way in which we can strengthen a vulnerable side of our church community.

We are also beginning to see that visiting a church digitally is a much more accessible and less intimidating

option for a non-Christian person than a physical visit. So there is also added missional value.

6. The Holy Spirit works even when we're not physically together

The first time you pray for someone on the other side of a camera and screen feels uncomfortable and "not normal". We prefer to sit next to each other and put our hands on each other's shoulders. But despite how we feel, the Holy Spirit continues to do His work. God continues to answer our prayers, even though it doesn't necessarily feel "powerful" for the person praying. He is not limited by the measures of the country. Our distance does not diminish His power. In this pandemic, we have already experienced several answers to prayer that prove this fact.

7. Digital ways of coming together are no substitute for physically coming together

Even though we are very grateful for the technology we have, it is not a substitute for physically coming together. We are physical beings who need physical contact. This period of "social distancing" has emphasized that need even more.

What are the specific things that are present in physically coming together as a congregation that we don't have in digital ways of coming together?

1. The loneliness of life, especially in the 1.5 society, disappears when we see and hear each other again, and all the more when we can give each other a hand or a hug again, when we can laugh, cry, pray, even dance with each other!

2. The uplifting power of being together in prayer and worship is not to be underestimated. Being surrounded by the voices of your family of faith is edifying in a way that is difficult to describe.
3. There is a certain spontaneity in the work of the Holy Spirit that is present in physical fellowship. Someone gets the impression that they have to say something or share or pray, and then they can share it with all those present at the same time, and someone else is immediately built up through it.

What we're going to miss for the time being

Before I explain our plan for getting back together again, I'd like to make a few things clear. As long as we live in the 1.5 meter society, our meetings will not be what they were before. They will feel different. We will experience them differently. It will even feel very unsociable at first.

I don't want to be negative per se, but we have to adjust our expectations. There are things we are going to miss very much for the time being when we all get back together again:

- shaking hands and giving hugs
- Long talk with each other over coffee, before and after the meeting
- Enjoying homemade cakes
- Children in the same room as people in the high-risk group
- That people from different households sit next to each other
- The “laying on of hands” when we're going to pray for someone

- Having conversations with each other without keeping a 1.5 meter distance

Whatever our different opinions about the measures imposed on us by the government, we must comply with them and do our utmost to do so. That by definition means that many of the things that used to make coming together so warm and welcoming will not be present for the time being.

There are also a number of people who might not want or be able to get together because of their own health. These people are just as connected to Oasis and we will continue to serve them as we have done in recent months. We must continue to bless each of them in the choices they make and at the same time emphasize how important it is to come together.

Together on Sunday

Here is the plan for getting back together again, first set out in a clear timeline and then in detail.

Timeline

Officially churches are allowed to meet again from July 1st (1-6-2020) with less than 100 people. However, Chris, Rebecca and their family must return to the United States on June 15 (15-5-2020) for a period of 8 weeks. While it is possible to get together without Chris and Rebecca, it is not preferable for our first services to be held back from this period without the leadership of our pastor. So the plan is

- Continue with 100% online meetings until August 29th (See "together in the summer" for ideas on how we can stay connected during the summer holidays).
- On the 30th august we will have our first physical service at the PCC Bergen building. We will also continue with the online services with the chat and live interaction

during the service, with pray requests that are mentioned in the chat shared in the service.

Details for meetings from August 30th

As long as the 1.5 meter measure is in place, our meetings have to be organised differently. Here is the plan of approach in which we do our best to comply with the measures and advice of the RIVM. Our sincere thanks to Natali de Jong for developing this plan and also to Vera Timmermans for thinking along with us. You are solution-oriented leaders and we are grateful for it!

Preparation:

- Get your seats ready. We can put 48 chairs in sets of 2. For households that come with more than 2 we can put some stacked chairs that they can put on the outside to keep the 1.5m distance or people have to sit separately.
- Use the school's speaker system and beamer on stage to reduce crowds and contact around the set up. Camera and other supplies for the live stream must be set up.
- Prepare translation system.
- Switch off signs and signage.
- Cleaning of chairs, classrooms, toilets, door handles...

Schedule:

- 9.00-9.45 Turning off the seats, musical instruments/ tapes and sound. Hanging signs outside, setting up translation system and sound and testing.
- 9.45-10.15 Practicing tape.
- 9.45-10.15 Prayer
- 10.00 - the gate to the parking lot opens. People have to stay in their cars until 10.15 a.m.

- 10.00 - the host is outside in front of the door to welcome people and say that the door will open at 10.15.
- 10.15 a.m. front door open. Let people walk directly to the hall, parents take children away.
- 10.30 a.m. shift starts.
- 11:30 end of shift, walking people directly to the exit.

Kids:

- Children can be taken to the nursery at 10.15am. The route is mapped out for the parents. Older children can walk to the classroom themselves.
- Child workers keep a distance of 1.5m with each other and where possible with the children.
- Handgel is available in each classroom.
- Children bring their own drinks and snacks from home.
- Children will be picked up after the service by their parents or if the weather is bad at the door of the classroom.

Band:

A maximum of 3 band members on stage, to be able to keep 1.5m distance.

A/V:

The A/V desk will be in a side room for the sound and slides. The song lyrics will be projected on the screen of the school next to the stage and possibly in the app.

Translation:

Translation is done via the translation system and is set up in the kitchen.

General rules:

- Keep a distance of 1.5m at all times.
- If one falls in the high risk group, it is better to stay at home and follow the service via the live stream.
- Do not come to the service if you are sick, cold, fever, cough etc.
- Sneeze/cough in elbow, wash hands regularly.
- Upon entering, follow the walking route and immediately sit down on the chair that is free and close to the stage.
- Go to the toilet at home as much as possible, to limit toilet visits.
- You can talk in the hall with the people around you, but stay on your chair.
- It is not allowed to talk in groups in the building.
- If you want to talk to someone who is not sitting near you, please do so outside or make an appointment together.

Miscellaneous:

- There will be no tea and coffee.
- Coats will have to be hung on the chair.
- Only the necessary people in the building for set up and finish construction. People will come alone as much as possible to prepare the hall/band.
- Collection via the GIVT app.
- People have to bring their own Bible or through a Bible app.
- Inform everyone of our progress through the mail and on our app/website.
- We have to take into account that we will be monitored by enforcement. So it is important that everyone sticks to the general rules.

What do we need?

- One host/hostess standing outside the front door at 10:00 to welcome people and say the door opens at 10:15.
- Signposting in the building, signposting at the fence outside of Oase and of our 'rules'.
- One or two people to show the way and bring people to their seats, make sure that the seats near the stage are occupied first, to reduce too much walking through the hall.
- People to clean any toilets, chairs, classrooms, door handles etc.
- Small set up team, 2 people.

Together in the summer

Here are a few ideas on how we can visit each other during the summer period.⁴

- Invite another family or person to join you for dinner. Doesn't feel safe yet, put down a laptop and eat with each other through a video call!
- Invite another family or person to join you on a Sunday morning to watch a sermon from the Oasis archive or watch a live stream service from another church.
- Go for a walk with another family or person in the dunes of Bergen. Everyone can bring their own lunch. When you are there, pray for each other, for the church and for the people in Bergen who do not yet know Jesus.
- The terraces are open again in the summer! The perfect opportunity to celebrate a bit of "normal" life with someone else from Oase.

⁴ De huidige maatregelen voor mensen uitnodigen bij jouw thuis of ontmoeten buiten kun je misschien ook helpen om te begrijpen wat wel en niet mag: <https://www.rijksoverheid.nl/onderwerpen/coronavirus-covid-19/openbaar-en-dagelijks-leven/afstand-houden>

Our primary purpose

This pandemic is the biggest challenge we have encountered as a society, and certainly as an oasis. The measures that blocked our meetings caused a temporary change. For this reason, the biggest question we now have is: "when can we get back together?" It is an important question and I hope that this document clearly answers that question.

As followers of Jesus, is our primary goal to get back together as soon as possible? Although my heart yearns for it, I myself am confronted with a question that feels much more important to me than any other question.

Do I still believe that Jesus is building his church, even if his followers don't immediately get their weekly meetings back the way they used to?

Let that question land for a while. Even if we cannot physically come together, do we still believe that Jesus

continues to do His work through the power of the Holy Spirit?

I believe that "we should not neglect the meeting among ourselves, as is customary with some, but encourage one another, and so much more as you see the great day approaching. (Hebrews 10:25) But let us also keep in mind, the primary goal of the church of Jesus Christ is not to come together. We do not exist just to exist! Our primary goal and right to exist is to realize the gospel together on this earth, to show the life of Jesus together, to carry on His work together, and to carry on His message.

My sincere hope for us, as the measures for our meetings begin to ease, is that our primary goal will remain primary in our hearts as well, and that we will learn to follow Him better together.... together.