

Kia ora CB whānau,

This Sunday we announced our plan for working within the Covid-19 Protection Framework, often called the “Traffic Light System”. The Framework comes into effect throughout New Zealand this Friday. It introduces new requirements for gatherings -- whether they be gatherings on marae, in the home, social sports, or church services.

The Manawatū, including Palmerston North City, will enter “Orange” mode this Friday. This means that we as a church will now need to decide how to manage attendance at each of our gatherings. If we require proof of vaccination then we can have unlimited people at an event. But if we don’t require vaccination then the event must be limited to 50 people and require social distancing. The Protection Framework is a shift away from lockdowns as the main tool for controlling Covid-19. Instead it emphasises vaccination as the best tool for protecting people going forward.

As a leadership we want to thank you for the participation in our recent church-wide survey. We shared with our community an overview of the feedback we received, as well as various graphs on Sunday. We had 235 responses in total. From the English responses we have 93% on the path to vaccination with 6% not yet vaccinated or not intending to be. As for the attitudes to gathering, 38% would like everyone to be vaccinated, whereas 33% don’t mind whether those gathered are vaccinated or not. Also, 15% of respondents disagreed with the church making use of vaccination certificates for any gatherings.

CB leadership have followed a process of listening first, seeking to understand, pray and discern, then speaking. We’ve now made the following decisions:

- Central Baptist will make use of vaccine certificates for some gatherings, particularly Sunday morning services for both CCCB and English-speaking congregations.
- Central Baptist will work to encourage unity by making our building available for both vaccinated and mixed gatherings at different times, and we will explore the possibility of a new mixed gathering early next year. Until then we will support a home-church gathering for the unvaccinated on Sunday mornings.

How did we reach these decisions? These are five principles that came into our decision-making:

1. **Health** -- Covid-19 is a health crisis. We will continue to take it seriously. We trust the Ministry of Health that the Pfizer vaccine is very effective at protecting against the symptoms of Covid-19, albeit imperfectly. We want to echo the words of Charles Hewlett, the national leader of the Baptist Union, and encourage people to be vaccinated. As a church, we have a responsibility for the health and safety of those who come to our Sunday services. We particularly need to consider our children (who can’t be vaccinated), our elderly, and those with compromised immunity. So we’ve chosen to make use of an option that we feel best supports the health and safety of those coming into our morning service.
2. **Government** -- We do not feel the Framework is requiring us to go against God’s word. We therefore need to recognise the New Testament injunction to submit to governing authorities, even though some of us may disagree with details. We’re seeking to do this by deliberately working within the framework and not seeking to oppose it to work around it.

3. **Togetherness** -- Central Baptist are a people called together to grow and go. We're choosing a way forward that best encourages gathered Christian community for our church and best supports a safe and welcoming environment for the stranger.
4. **Listening** -- Following our Baptist heritage, we've sought to listen to the voices in our community, primarily by using the survey. We've heard the call to take this seriously.
5. **Unity in Christ** -- We all have an equal status in the sight of God. We're called to love each other, even through our differences. One way of showing this is by making the building available for both vaccinated and mixed gatherings. And we'd like to have a conversation early next year about encouraging a new mixed gathering.

The Protection Framework is a very new development and we are seeking to do our best in understanding the requirements. We must state, however, that details are scarce and so we can only plan with the information we have available at this point in time. Plans may change as details emerge.

For now, our plans are to use Vaccine Pass for Sunday services (both English and CCCB), for CB Youth, Deeper, Soar, Mainly Music, BMF, Best Years, and combined CB Young Adults events. Prayer and Praise will be a mixed gathering. We had announced on Sunday that Soar would be a mixed event due to the age transition from 11 to 12 for children during intermediate years. After further consideration and conversation we have decided Soar will require a Vaccine Pass. For Life Groups, we encourage each group to have a conversation about this topic and decide how they would like to operate with respect to vaccination.

Note that the remainder of 2021 will be a time of transition for some ministries. In particular, Youth and Mainly Music may have events not requiring vaccination (and therefore using limits and distancing) while they close out the year.

The Protection Framework offers a path out of alert level restrictions and back towards community for groups throughout New Zealand. But it comes with risks: Both of its options have the potential to divide people in new ways. It's therefore so important that we work against division by reaffirming who we are, who we belong to, and what we're called to:

- Be the people of God,, fully loved by him; 1 John 4: 7 – 9, 19, John 3:16, Colossians 3: 12, Ephesians 1: 3 – 14
- We belong to Christ as we seek to follow his path in obedience to him and to obey the laws of the land; Titus 3: 1,2, Romans 13: 1 – 7, 1 Peter 2: 13 – 15
- We're called into the way of love, a love for each other that's real and compelling; John 13: 34, 1 Peter 4: 8, Romans 12: 9 – 10
- That's part of our witness to the world! We're called to gather together; Hebrews 10: 24, 25, Galatians 6: 2, 1 Timothy 2: 1 – 3, 2 Timothy 4: 1, 2, 1 Corinthians 11: 17ff, and 14: 26ff
- We're called to build each other up, minister to each other, pray for each other, care for each other, bear each other's burdens and we're called to welcome the stranger; Proverbs 14: 21, 31, 31: 8 – 9, Isaiah 61: 1,2, (Luke 4: 18), Matthew 5:42, 19: 21, 25: 31 – 46, Luke 3: 11, John 13: 34, Galatians 6:2, James 1: 27, and 2: 15-16

As a church, the ways we welcome and care have to change for a time. But the fact that we welcome and care should never change.

Ngā mihi

CB Eldership