



Short of Breath

Making Sense of Covid-19 Complexity

A Five-Part Study

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Introduction

One of the symptoms of Covid-19 is shortness of breath. The virus attacks the lungs, and those who lose their lives die of pneumonia, unable to breathe.¹ Breath is particularly poignant for Christians, with rich spiritual and biblical resonance, and the air we inhale is integral to the cycles of creation that sustain all life. The Covid-19 pandemic is blowing its way around the world, with huge impacts on every nation, on the earth and the atmosphere. Every person is vulnerable to the disease, but human vulnerability is very different for those with resources than for those without; Covid-19 is exposing inequality. In this vastly complex and rapidly changing global context, how do Christians do theology? What sense do we make of it? Where is God in all this?

This study leads through a theological reflection process informed by complexity theory. A complexity perspective is interested in diverse interconnecting realities in multi-faceted and fluid situations, willing to cope with the anxiety of things not necessarily making sense or falling into neat predictable patterns. The effects of Covid-19 on human health and society and the natural environment, and the effects of a range of factors on Covid-19 raises a vast field for theological reflection. The project aims to be generative rather than conclusive; to open lines of enquiry rather than to apply doctrine. It chooses three 'themes' related to Covid-19: the experience of having the disease, the universal and the unfair nature of the disease's effects, and impacts of and on air pollution. Each theme is explored biblically using elements of theological reflection process. Footnotes include links to online articles which can supplement the study.

Study One: A Complex Situation

What do we make of the Covid-19 global situation? What does a faith perspective bring? Do we want clarity from the church, sermons not too complicated, messages of reassurance? While it cannot be wrong to reaffirm the simple truths from the heart of the Christian faith, this is not an adequate theological response to rapidly changing and deeply disorienting times. The Spirit who “blows where it chooses” (John 3:8, NRSV), “inside and outside the fences”,² is not easily contained within a three-point sermon when what could previously have been taken for granted has been blown away. Skills for dealing with complexity are required for those who would seek to interpret holy scripture and connect faith with life in 2020.

Graham Stanton defines complexity “as consisting of many parts with multiple connections.”³ It draws attention to ambiguity and is suited to “contexts in which multiple inputs result in unpredictable and unstable patterns of cause and effect.”⁴ This challenges our assumptions of what we can know or control. Complexity is not so much a science in itself as a perspective which can be applied across disciplines and subjects, wherever there is the need to examine “the relationships between the parts as well as the parts themselves.”⁵

The danger with complexity is becoming overwhelmed with detail, lost in never-ending interactions and cross-effects. Gys Loubser explains the process of placing limits on the information we can deal with at any one time, “which means that the complexity of a system needs to be reduced or interpreted in order to gain an understanding of it.”⁶ This demands a high level of self-awareness of why we choose certain aspects and ignore others, what aims we are exploring and what biases we take for granted.

Studies Three and Four describe two pairs of contrasting ideas about Covid-19 effects in order to explore the principle that the art of complexity “lies not in thinking one in terms of the other in binary motion, but in terms of how the one is dependent and determined by the other.” This “opens up space for transdisciplinary enquiry that does not disconnect opposites, but thinks of them as part of a unity.”⁷

Those familiar with an action-reflection approach to theology may not find complexity too overwhelming. For over three decades the field of practical theology has advocated a wholistic interactive model of ‘doing theology’ in which a wide field of components are considered relevant for discerning the voice of God; bringing personal experience, emotion, subjectivity and a broad understanding of context into conversation with scripture, theology and the riches of the Christian tradition. Laurie Green argues that “All theology has context. All revelation must be mediated through some experience and therefore it has a context, and a surrounding situation that itself becomes part of the revelation God presents.”⁸ “Theological reflection seeks to understand and interpret the world through the eyes of Christian faith using all the sacramental, credal and biblical insights that the Church has at its disposal – but it will be God in our experience of the world which will be the focus of theology’s attention.”⁹

This is “not an end in itself. It is there to serve as a tool in the transformation and conversion of that creation – that people and society may conform through peace and justice to the Kingdom of God as inaugurated by Jesus Christ.”¹⁰ For John Swinton and Harriet Mowat the purpose of critical reflection on situations is “to ensure faithful practice and authentic human living in the light of scripture and tradition.”¹¹ Doing theology in a time of crisis requires looking broadly, asking hard questions, attending to personal response, and trusting that missional clarity will emerge.

Discuss the material in Study One; any thoughts and reactions.

Activity: Complexity Map

Map out (either independently or as a group) how you see the effects of Covid-19 on the world. Get a big piece of paper and some pens. Write ‘Covid-19’ in the middle, and write and draw all the different things you can think of that are affected by it with arrows out. Also think about things that effect Covid-19 (arrows in), and arrows showing cross-effects.

After a while, stop working on the page, sit back and look at it. What do you notice? How does it make you feel?

On another page write down: feelings, reactions, and any questions that occur to you. What Bible verses or ideas about God seem relevant to you as you look at the complexity of the Covid-19 situation?

Discuss: Anxiety

Complexity theory highlights the anxiety that is the natural human reaction to confusion and ambiguity. We want to know where we stand and what will come next. Covid-19 is making that difficult. Discuss how you experience anxiety in relation to lockdown and ongoing crises.

Prayer: Finish with some time of quiet. The best antidote to anxiety is the peace of God. Sit comfortably, feet on the floor, breathe slowly and relax. Read aloud Psalm 131, and allow 5 minutes of silence.

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Study Two: Shortness of Breath

Most people who catch the 'corona' virus known as Covid-19 become ill with a 'flu'. Some don't even notice they have it. A significant minority, however, become seriously ill with Covid-19 pneumonia, and can die. The most common symptom is 'shortness of breath', breathing fast and shallow, gasping for breath, as the virus attacks the lining of the lungs. Death is caused by respiratory failure.¹²

Reflecting theologically on respiratory failure takes us firstly into scripture. The Hebrew Bible has three words for 'breath': *nephesh* is life-force, understood to be in the breath (as in Genesis 1:20), *neshmah* or *nishmat* is the physical breath (as in Genesis 2:7), and *ruach* is both spirit and breath.¹³ In the New Testament the Greek word *pneuma* has a similar double meaning, primarily used for the Holy Spirit. The resurrected Christ in John 20:22 breathes (literally blows¹⁴) the Holy Spirit into his disciples.

One common use of the word 'breath' in scripture is to note its ending as a person dies. Jesus' death is described as him giving up his breath in Matthew 27:50, while Mark and Luke use the word *exepneusen* (Mark 15:37, Luke 23:46), meaning literally 'exhale'.

This biblical understanding of the importance of breath is somewhat alien to western culture. We are more likely to locate spirituality and faith in the mind (brain, beliefs), in the heart, or in the hands and feet of ethical living. The experience of lung disease forces a re-evaluation of the importance of what we easily take for granted, breathing in and out, and its godly significance.

Seeking the Holy Spirit in the breath leads us into our own bodies, memories and responses. Theological reflection demands emotional honesty and extending self-awareness in order to know in our own selves the truth of faith.¹⁵ For the author this confronts me with memories of sitting with my mother in hospital, watching the tubes and her pain, afraid that this bout of pneumonia would be fatal. Praying in our own bodies brings awareness of how breath is constricted by grief and shortened by anxiety. Spiritual practices of many centuries and many traditions bring length to the breath and calm to the human spirit. The very name of God in Hebrew, Yahweh, is itself a breath prayer.

Discuss the material in Study Two; any thoughts and reactions.

Discuss: Shortness of breath

Find out more about what it is like to suffer from pneumonia. Read stories from people who have been ill with Covid-19. Share your own experiences of being seriously ill or out of breath. What feelings come up as you think about these experiences?

Bible study: Breath and Spirit

Job often mentions breath. Look up Job 12:1-10 and 34:12-15, also Isaiah 42. How do you understand the Old Testament claim that our breath is totally dependent on God's breath? Read Daniel 5:23-28; is Covid-19 the 'writing on the wall' for us?

Read John 20:19-23. How has your experience of the Holy Spirit been like breath?

Discuss this comment:

The 'correct' Sunday School answer to the question 'where is Jesus?' is 'He lives in my heart.' A more biblical answer might be 'He lives in my breath.'

Prayer: Read aloud James K Baxter's "Song to the Holy Spirit" (in the Anglican Prayer Book, p.157, available online).

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Study Three: The Universal and The Unfair

No human being on the planet is immune to Covid-19; it is a new “novel” virus to which everyone is susceptible. In only four months it has spread to almost every country on earth. Has any other threat in human history directly affected the entire human race simultaneously? The universal nature of Covid-19 (brought about by unprecedented levels of international travel) has fascinating echoes in theology about what it means to be human and the nature of human sin.

However, the universality of Covid-19 is seriously skewed by the patterns of inequality in our world. While people with houses and financial reserves are able to follow instructions for ‘social distancing’ and keep themselves isolated and safe from infection, the poor of the world cannot. Epidemiologist Grace Noppert explains the factors at work behind statistics emerging from the USA where, for example, “while 14% of the Michigan population is black, 40% of COVID-19 deaths are among blacks.” She describes deep-rooted patterns of social and racial inequality, including substandard and overcrowded housing, unhealthy food, chronic stress and limited access to health care leading to “both increased exposure to infectious pathogens and a reduced ability of individuals to fight infections” in low-income communities.¹⁶

As Covid-19 takes hold in the world’s slums and refugee camps the sheer volume of human suffering will be barely imaginable.¹⁷ This creates vast challenges for aid and Christian mission organisations dedicated to the welfare of the poor, compounded by reduced charitable donations and global barriers to travel, as well as the high risk of contagion.

Theological reflection on human vulnerability to Covid-19 plunges us deep into what it means to be human, and heightens our awareness of what we share as a species despite our differences. It also heightens our shared inhumanity, as injustice confronts our illusions of who we claim to be and of the social world we are responsible for creating. Universality proclaims the value of each person, while inequality proclaims the opposite, that some people are worth more than others.

Our scriptures contain much to affirm God’s creation of all people, and God’s insistence that all people be treated with justice. Paul’s sermon in the Areopagus begins in the fundamental Creator relationship between God and all humanity: “he himself gives everyone life and breath” (Acts 17:25, NIV). Job also affirms God’s lordship over all: “If he should take back his spirit to himself, and gather to himself his breath, all flesh would perish together, and all mortals return to dust” (Job 34:14-15, NRSV).

It is God’s Creator relationship with all people that is the foundation for God’s call for compassion and justice. This is expressed powerfully by the prophets who oscillate between honour of God, Lord of all, and condemnation of idolatry and oppression. Theological reflection on inequality demands of us ears to hear and eyes to see what we would rather not. It forces on us an acknowledgement of our own wealth and privilege, as well as gratitude for the homes in which we live and the food in our fridge. Theological questions become missional questions as the church grapples

with how to serve faithfully, how to use limited resources most effectively to serve the poor.

With courage we can begin to ask even bigger questions, about the fundamental shape of the world in which we live.¹⁸ These become apocalyptic questions as we listen to voices from the world's margins. Indian author Arundhati Roy describes the panic and hunger she has witnessed during the Covid-19 lockdown, and calls for more far-reaching change than just managing pandemic: "in the midst of this terrible despair, it [pandemic] offers us a chance to rethink the doomsday machine we have built for ourselves. Nothing could be worse than a return to normality."¹⁹

Discuss the material in Study Three; any thoughts and reactions. How do you see the effects of Covid-19 being at the same time both universal (affecting everyone) and unfair (affecting some people far worse than others)?

Draw a simple outline of a person. Write in the things we have in common as human beings. Choose another colour pen and write in the ways in which we are all 'image bearers' of God.

Bible study: What Bible verses speak to you of God's concern for all people, and God's special concern for the poor and downtrodden? One helpful tool is Bible Gateway (www.biblegateway.com); type in "justice" or "the poor" in the search bar and explore. It also enables you to compare translations.

Mission: Find out what Christian aid and mission organisations are saying about their work at this time. What is our responsibility in the face of global problems?

Prayer: Share a time of prayer including prayers of thanks and prayers for those most affected by pandemic.

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Study Four: Breathing the Air

The air we breathe is part of the intricate flow of systems that make up the atmosphere of planet Earth. The 'planetary boundaries' modelling of human impact on the earth warns of "large, irreversible changes", i.e. disastrous breakdown of the framework that supports life. It draws attention to global damage from carbon emissions, air pollution from nitrogen and other chemicals and damage to the freshwater cycle, all of which have massive impacts on climate, temperature, and living things.²⁰ Air pollution also plays a significant role in the Covid-19 story. Tracing the impacts of air pollution on Covid-19, and the effects of the Covid-19 lockdown on air pollution involves several inter-related areas of science, with research just emerging. Initial reports show that a) air pollution makes Covid-19 worse, and b) Covid-19 makes air pollution better.

a) Negative effects of poor air quality. Environmental and public health scientists have for many years documented the negative health effects of air pollution. A 2014 OECD report found that outdoor air pollution kills more than 3 million people across the world every year.²¹ Breathing air that contains fine particulate matter (PM_{2.5}) exacerbates a range of illnesses, including Covid-19. A long exposure to air pollution increases the chance of dying from Covid-19 by 15%, according to a recent Harvard study. "A small increase in long-term exposure to PM_{2.5} leads to a large increase in COVID-19 death rate ... The study results underscore the importance of continuing to enforce existing air pollution regulations to protect human health both during and after the COVID-19 crisis."²² Poor air from industry in north Italy and inner-city living in New York contributed to high death tolls.

b) Positive effects on air quality from societies in lock-down. Countries in lock-down have seen rapid decreases in air pollution, with less cars on the road and factories closed.²³ After just one week of national lockdown in NZ NIWA air quality scientist Dr lan Longley reported up to 80% drop in nitrogen oxide levels by the Auckland motorway,²⁴ and the Sustainable Business Network in NZ report that carbon emissions from industry halved.²⁵ Improved air quality has been seen by many as a significant 'good news' story from global pandemic, a 'silver lining' to the dark clouds. People have expressed surprise that we can change our habits and that air recovers from pollution so quickly. Climate activists have expressed hopes that improvements to air quality will be a motivating factor towards longer term sustained reductions in carbon emissions and other forms of human impact pollution.

Theological reflection on the state of our air takes us into conversation with the science around climate change and the role of carbon. The challenge is to hear the prophetic voice of those decrying the human burning of the planet through use of fossil fuels and destruction of forests and natural habitat. Biblical writers may not have known planes and cars but they did understand fire and the destruction it can cause. Seeing smoke could be a sign of towns burning, as in Judges 20:40, bringing fear and grief; Proverbs 10:26 describes a slow messenger as like "vinegar to the teeth and smoke to the eyes" (NRSV). God's presence could be manifest in fire and smoke, especially in a liturgical context. However, Elijah's experience in the cave was that God was not in the fire but in the "sound of sheer silence" (1 Kings 19:12, NRSV).

Art, poetry, music and liturgy can all be important avenues for theological reflection. Kevin Vanhoozer advocates “a special kind of literacy” required for Christians to “read the signs of the times.”²⁶ ‘Cultural texts’, such as ‘viral’ social media posts, can be a tool of engagement with shifts in culture. Excerpts from two such texts follow.

‘Rest now, e Papatūānuku’ by Maori poet Nadine Anne Hura:

Rest now, e Papatūānuku²⁷
Breathe easy and settle
Right here where you are
We’ll not move upon you
For awhile
...
So be still now
Wrap your hills around our absence
Loosen the concrete belt cinched tight at your waist
Rest.
Breathe.
Recover.
Heal –
And we will do the same.²⁸

‘Lockdown’ by Irish Capuchin Franciscan Richard Hendrick ‘went viral’ on social media:

The other side of the virus,
An opportunity to awaken.
Yes there is panic buying,
Yes there is sickness.
Yes there is even death.
But,
They say that in Wuhan after so many years of noise
 You can hear the birds again.
They say that after just a few weeks of quiet
 The sky is no longer thick with fumes
 But blue and grey and clear.
...
Today, breathe.
Listen, behind the factory noises of your panic -
 The birds are singing again
 The sky is clearing,
 Spring is coming,
And we are always encompassed by Love.²⁹

Both poems express a sense that pandemic lockdown is a blessing to the earth. Both are addressed to 2nd person “you”; in ‘Lockdown’ the ‘you’ is open-ended, while ‘Rest now’ is addressed to the earth itself in the person of Papatūānuku. The encouragement in both poems is to breathe. Does the earth breathe? Does God grieve for air pollution? Does air pollution damage the *ruach* of God? How can people of faith be ‘a breath of fresh air’?³⁰

Discuss the material in Study Four; any thoughts and reactions, especially to the questions in the last paragraph.

Describe what it feels like to breathe smoke or polluted air. How do you respond emotionally and spiritually to air pollution?

Discuss: 'Green' economy

Find and share comments from people who are saying that we must not return to the air pollution and carbon emission levels of 2019 as we restart our economy.

What do you and your group think about this?

How could we 'green' our post-Covid economy?

What could do you about it?

Poetry

Read the two poems in the study. You might like to look them up online and read the entire poem. Discuss the themes of the poems.

Take time to begin writing your own poem. Lead this into prayer.

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Study Five: More Questions

This study has delved into the complexity of theological reflection in relation to themes identified from the current diverse emergent realities of the Covid-19 global pandemic. It has explored the experience of suffering from Covid-19 pneumonia and two pairs of polarities and cross-effect: the simultaneously universal and unequal nature of human vulnerability to Covid-19, and the effects of air pollution on Covid-19 and visa versa. The significance of breath has been a focus, from virus sufferers being 'short of breath' to the suggestion that the earth itself is deprived of breath by air pollution.

It is the task of theological reflection to generate interesting questions. In a time of uncertainty questions are more important than answers. Moving through it all is God, inspiring questions such as "where is God in this?", "what is God saying through this ... to me? to the church?". It is not the intention of this article to attempt a tidy resolution of the complex questions facing the church in 2020. The encouragement is for all Christians to listen to the world in which we live, to both the dominant and the marginal voices, to cultural texts and emotional reactions, and to bring these into conversation with scripture and tradition in order to discern the breath of the Spirit. We look for signs of God at work, even in tragedy, loss, isolation and sudden change. The purpose is to "participate in the unfolding historical narrative of God ... to recognize who Jesus is and seek to live in the light of this revelation."³¹ To finish, the chorus of Fred Kaan's lively eucharistic hymn, expressing the Christian hope for all creation, very appropriate for this Easter season:

Jesus lives again;
earth can breathe again.
Pass the Word around:
loaves abound!³²

Discuss the material in Study Five; any thoughts and reactions.

Discuss: Review the topics that you have covered during this study. What stands out particularly for you? What questions seem the most important? What questions will you keep living with and exploring?

Re-draw the Complexity Map. Start again with a big piece of paper. Do the exercise from Study One again, but this time with two different coloured pens. In one colour draw the aspects of our complex situation in 2020, and in the other colour write in what you feel God is saying about it. You might include some of the Bible verses or prayers that have been significant for you, or key words.

When you have finished, sit with it in silence for a minute, then ask: 'if there was an image that expresses this in some way, what might that be?' A metaphor won't sum up the whole complex picture but it can evoke your sense of where God is in the midst of it.

On another piece of paper draw the metaphor (a rough sketch is fine), and use this in your closing prayer.

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- ² James K. Baxter, "Song to the Holy Spirit." in *A New Zealand Prayer Book*, the Anglican Church in Aotearoa, New Zealand and Polynesia (1988), 157.
- ³ Graham D. Stanton, "A Theology of Complexity for Christian Leadership in an Uncertain Future." *Practical Theology*, 12 (2) (2019): 147-157, 147. DOI: 10.1080/1756073X.2019.1595318
- ⁴ *ibid.*, 148.
- ⁵ Gys Loubser, "Engaging Complexity." *Verbum et Ecclesia*, Pretoria, 35:1 (2014): 1-7, 2.
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- ⁷ Rika Preiser, "Observing Representational Practices in Art and Anthropology - a Transdisciplinary Approach." *The Journal for Transdisciplinary Research in Southern Africa*, 6:1 (July 2010): 57- 72.
- ⁸ Laurie Green, *Let's Do Theology: a Pastoral Cycle Resource Book* (London: Continuum, 1990), 16.
- ⁹ *ibid.*, 11.
- ¹⁰ *ibid.*, 12.
- ¹¹ John Swinton and Harriet Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 2nd ed. (London: SCM Press, 2016), vi.
- ¹² Patients with Covid-19 are likely to have shortness of breath, fatigue, sputum production, headache, and a high respiratory rate (P = 0.016). Death rate in cohort studied was 4%. Rong-Hui Du, Li-Rong Liang, et.al., "Predictors of Mortality for Patients with COVID-19 Pneumonia Caused by SARS-CoV-2: A Prospective Cohort Study." *European Respiratory Journal*, 'Early View', 8 April 2020. DOI: 10.1183/13993003.00524-2020
- ¹³ Of these words *ruach* is the most common, used 205 times. The spirit/breath of God is (almost) always *ruach*, but all 3 words are used for people and animals.
- ¹⁴ The verb *emphusaó* is used only here in the Bible, meaning 'blow into', like we might blow up a balloon or blow into a trumpet.
- ¹⁵ Thomas St. James O'Connor and Elizabeth Meakes argue that "feeling, imagination, and images are essential to the praxis of theological reflection." "Poetic Imagination: A Qualitative Study on Emotion, Images, and Verses from Sacred Texts in the Praxis of Theological Reflection in Pastoral Care and Counseling." *Journal of Health Care Chaplaincy*, 14:2 (2008): 133-145.
- ¹⁶ Grace A. Noppert, "COVID-19 is hitting black and poor communities the hardest, underscoring fault lines in access and care for those on margins." *The Conversation*, 9 April 2020. <<https://theconversation.com/covid-19-is-hitting-black-and-poor-communities-the-hardest-underscoring-fault-lines-in-access-and-care-for-those-on-margins-135615>>
- ¹⁷ Around the world countless people are facing desperation from a sudden loss of income and mobility under lockdown. An Al Jazeera report on the situation in Tunisia (11 April 2020) interviewed a man named Jelassi who can no longer afford food for his family. "In such conditions you cannot work and cannot even borrow money ... there will be a catastrophe, people can't stand it anymore, hunger leads to catastrophes." Sofia Barbarani, "'We need food': Tunisians struggle under coronavirus lockdown." *Al Jazeera* news story, 11 Apr 2020. <<https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/04/food-tunisians-struggle-coronavirus-lockdown-200411142312791>>
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- ¹⁹ Arundhati Roy, "The Pandemic is a Portal." *Financial Times*, 4 April 2020. <<https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>>
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²⁴ NZ Herald, "Coronavirus Covid-19: Dramatic improvement in Auckland air quality." 31 March 2020. <https://www.nzherald.co.nz/nz/news/article.cfm?c_id=1&objectid=12321380>

²⁵ Phil Jones, "Covid-19 lockdown offers glimpse of a low carbon future." *Sustainable Business Network*, press release, 1 April 2020. <<https://sustainable.org.nz/sustainable-business-news/covid-19-lockdown-offers-glimpse-of-a-low-carbon-future>>

²⁶ Kevin J. Vanhoozer, "What is Everyday Theology," in K.J. Vanhoozer, C.A. Anderson, M.J. Sleasman, eds., *Everyday Theology: How to Read Cultural Texts and Interpret Trends* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2007), 18.

²⁷ Papatūānuku is 'Earth-Mother' in Maori culture.

²⁸ Nadine Anne Hura, "Rest Now, E Papatūānuku" (excerpt), *The Spinoff*, 25 March 2020. <<https://thespinoff.co.nz/atea/25-03-2020/rest-now-e-papatuanuku>>

²⁹ Fr. Richard Hendrick, OFM, "Lockdown" (excerpt), 13 March 2020, *Jesuit Resource*.

<<https://www.xavier.edu/jesuitresource/online-resources/prayer-index/coronavirus-prayers>>

³⁰ As Eugene Peterson puts it in his translation of Philippians 2:15: "Go out into the world uncorrupted, a breath of fresh air in this squalid and polluted society." (The Message).

³¹ Swinton & Mowat, *Practical Theology and Qualitative Research*, 8.

³² Frederik Herman Kaan, "Let Us Talents and Tongues Employ," written in 1975. *With One Voice: A Hymn Book for All the Churches, with New Zealand Supplement* (Auckland: William Collins: 1982), 769.