

Research That Does Not End: A Sampled Research Approach for Discovering, Engaging and Sustaining Authentic Praxis Ministry

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Introduction

“Is there anyone who can take stock of his own weakness and still dare to credit his chastity and innocence to his own efforts? And could such a person think to love you less, on the pretext that he has had smaller need for your mercy, that mercy with which you forgive the sins of those who turn back to you? If there is anyone whom you have called, who by responding to your summons has avoided those sins which he finds me remembering and confessing in my own life as he reads this, let him not mock me; for I have been healed by the same doctor who has granted him the grace not to fall ill, or at least to fall ill less seriously. Let such a person therefore love you just as much, or even more, on seeing that the same physician who rescued me from sinful diseases of such gravity has kept him immune.”²

This article is being introduced with words found in Saint Augustine’s *The Confessions* because I am attracted to Saint Augustine’s autobiographical style of chronicling his confessions as well as

¹ As an Atlanta, Georgia native, I earned a Bachelors degree from Clark College (now known as ClarkAtlanta University), and then simultaneously earned a Master of Business (MBA) degree from Atlanta University (now known as ClarkAtlanta University) and a Computer Operations Diploma from Atlanta Area Technical School (now known as Atlanta Technical College). After nearing a twenty year corporate career with IBM, I was divinely called to ministry. As a response to the divine call, I pursued and earned a Master of Divinity (MDiv) degree from Duke University’s School of Divinity. In 2011, I earned a Doctor of Ministry (DMin) degree from Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC). While consistently practicing ministry through traditional venues such as church, I also practice ministry through the non-traditional venue of Vance-Granville Community College (VGCC). Currently, I am VGCC’s Department Chair of Adult Basic Skills, a part-time VGCC instructor teaching life skills in the Federal Correctional Complex in Butner, NC and a Co-Coordinator of VGCC’s Male Mentoring Program.

² Maria Boulding, trans., *The Confessions /Saint Augustine* (New York: Vintage Spiritual Classics, 1998) 34-35.

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Augustine's theological brilliance. It was not readily apparent when I began my academic journey at the Interdenominational Theological Center (ITC) in 2008, but my attraction to autobiographical styles of writings would become an essential component of my Doctor of Ministry (DMin) research project based on a research methodology known as heuristic research. Heuristic research was ideally suited for me because heuristic research creates a phenomenological lens that spotlights personal experiences and insights by asking: How did the researcher experience a particular phenomenon? Heuristic research pioneer, Clark Moustakas, expands this notion further by declaring, "In heuristic research the investigator must have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated. There must have been actual autobiographical connections."³

This article samples my DMin project's heuristic research as well as my evolving heuristic research. Additionally, this article examples the inherent autobiographical writing style of heuristic research. Though specific to my personal story, hopefully this article will serve as a template for which readers are able to import their own personal stories. Succinctly, this article offers an autobiographical narrative purposed to highlight how heuristic research can help validate and evolve calls to ministry in the midst of uncertainty and adversity in hopes of inspiring Doctor of Ministry candidates to consider heuristic research as their research methodology of choice. Doing this may produce more ministry leaders that will be more systematic in discovering, engaging and sustaining authentic praxis ministry.

A Brief Confession

I had no idea why God called me to ministry and no idea what I was called to do. I had no interest in ministry leadership. Admittedly, I had a relatively strong relationship with Jesus Christ and was routinely involved with some outward form of Christian service for the majority of

³ Clark Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*, (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1990), 14.

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my life.⁴ Admittedly, I knew and know the voice of the divine.⁵ So there truly is no question about the source of my call. Nevertheless, I confess that I do not understand why God would not be satisfied with the sincere efforts of my *trying* to do enough to be theologically comfortable. What do I mean when I note, being “theologically comfortable?” It means to find justifications, reasons, examples, etc. to do what we (humans) desire or want in ways that allow us (humans) to believe or feel that God is ok with what we (humans) desire or want (independent of God’s desire or want). Ministry leadership was not my desire or want. At least that is what my conscious mind was telling me. But, could it be possible that I may have subconsciously desired or wanted to be in ministry leadership? After all, I was called to ministry during some of the most difficult times of my life. And, could it be possible that an unconscious self-constructed call to ministry be a way of escaping some of those difficulties with marital strife being the greatest source of my difficulties? Could it be possible that an unconscious self-constructed call to ministry be a way for me to be “theologically comfortable?”

An Attempt to Define the Authenticity of A Call To Ministry⁶

On one hand I claimed I had no doubt as to the source of my call. On the other hand, I clearly had doubt.⁷ Was I divinely called to ministry? Was the call anchored in an authentic reality? Or, was the call anchored in some self-constructed reality? Assuming the call was anchored in an authentic reality what does God expect? What do others expect? What does one expect of self? How does one explain this thing called “call?” I

⁴ I use the term relative here because I believe that human sin and frailty challenges one’s ability to fully maximize being in relationship with Jesus. Scores of theological doctrines, writings, traditions, biblical narratives and the like support this belief.

⁵ *The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice.* John 10:3-4 (NIV)

⁶ In the context of this article, authentic, divine, divinely, and truly are used interchangeably.

⁷ James writes: *One who doubts is like a wave of the sea, blown and tossed by the wind.* James 1:6b (NIV). Confirmed.

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struggled with these questions as well as many similar questions. I happened to have been called (whether authentic or self-constructed) while working a demanding full time corporate job; working to nurture a one year old son; and working through intense marital strife. My assumed authentic call came in the Fall of 2002. As a matter of note, my call included suddenly hearing a supernatural voice that literally whispered the word: Duke. Readily, Duke University came to my mind. But, the connection between Duke University and my call was not readily clear. Out of curiosity, I searched Duke's website where I unexpectedly discovered Duke had a School of Divinity.⁸ Immediately, I began investigating the possibility of starting Duke Divinity School as early as January 2003. Subsequently, I applied and was accepted into Duke's Divinity School. I was ready to start classes in January 2003. I believed that my call must have been divine based on evidence that I considered to be providential. Providential evidence was varied, but consistent in ways that would allow me to pursue my call to ministry. Three exceptional examples of providential evidence come to mind. I considered it divine grace when I was readily accepted into Duke Divinity School after being out of school for twenty years. I considered it to be a miracle when I was reassigned to a new corporate position that would allow me to attend Duke's full time academic program without trading off full time work responsibilities. Most important, I sensed a spiritual peace that helped me feel assured that I would be able to balance full time work and full time curriculum without sacrificing significant time with my young son.⁹

When looking at all considered being providential, it may have been clear that I was authentically called to ministry if not for all of the contrasting evidence. The most contrasting evidence of all was my then wife's adversity towards my "claim" of being called. Adversity from my

⁸ As unbelievable as it may seem, I had no idea that Duke had a School of Divinity. I earned a Master of Business Administration (MBA) in 1983 and there was nothing in my conscious mind that would have caused me to think of going back to school. More so, there was nothing in my conscious mind that would have caused me to think of going back to a school specifically associated with divinity.

⁹ As a confession, being an accessible/accountable father was/is one of the most important aspects of my psychology. Candidly, if I thought that I would have had to sacrifice significant amounts of time with my son to follow my call, any and/or all advancement to follow my call would have ceased. Thank God for grace and mercy.

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then wife was so strong that I chose to cancel plans to start Duke Divinity School in January 2003. Was I truly called to ministry? Would God call persons to ministry without making it *totally* possible for them to fulfill their call?

Does Adversity Validate or Invalidate an Assumed Divine Call?

Eventually, I pushed through a myriad of adversities and started Duke Divinity School in August 2003. Relationally, one of the greatest adversities of my entire life arose. My 2 year old son was being subjected to behavioral labels and at 6 years old was diagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). As a response to the ADHD label, efforts to subject my son to mind altering prescription medication were initiated and perpetrated by persons with perceived power.¹⁰

As challenging as this time period was, I was able to excel academically, exceed work performance expectations, and compartmentalize my brokenness in ways that shielded outsiders from the realities of my pain, confusion and doubt.¹¹ I believe one way to validate divine movement and/or divine involvement is to see evidence of the impossible becoming possible. My ability to endure the next three years of heightened adversities was my personal witness of the impossible becoming possible. Those years included my earning my Master of

¹⁰ Two points of importance must be noted here. Point one; I acknowledge the realities of ADHD. For some, ADHD is reality. However for others, ADHD is not reality as in the case of my son; thus, my use of the term, "label" because labels do not necessarily reflect reality. Point two; I note "persons with perceived power" because eyewitness accounts and documented correspondences between these particular persons and me provide evidence that these persons saw themselves as authoritative figures who had the power to make decisions regarding my son independent of me. I would not and will not accept any notion that human beings have the power to make decisions regarding *anyone's* child independent of *any* sound minded, caring, well respected, accessible parent/caregiver/guardian.

¹¹ To be clear, I do not credit myself here. Having the ability to excel, exceed, and compartmentalize during this time period was the reality of divine grace. As a matter of fact, I credit 2 Corinthians 12:8, 9 as the touchstone scripture that got me through this period and beyond. *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* (NIV)

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Divinity (MDiv) degree, my son ending up in an elementary school that was led by a culturally sensitive principal who dismissed ADHD allegations, and marital strife being tempered just enough to keep my marriage afloat. From this perspective, adversity validated my assumed divine call. But, time and a more intensified set of adversities would again challenge my confidence (and quite frankly, challenge my Christian faith). Concerns about the authenticity of my call to ministry returned. It was becoming more and more difficult to distinguish authentic reality from self-constructed reality.

An Evolving Focus on the Human Mind

Prior to the adversities highlighted in this article, I had not consciously noticed the fragility of reality. In retrospect, I realize that adversities specific to marital strife created a pathway for me to begin taking a closer look at the fragility of reality. Entry into this pathway occurred when I began engaging in marital counseling sessions. The more marital counseling sessions experienced, the more evidence that my then wife's version of reality was vastly different than my version of reality. I did all I could to look at myself as openly as possible. If there was fault, blame and/or unknown brokenness deeply packed within my mind, I wanted to unpack it. Thus, I readily embraced any and all marital counseling inquiries. As a matter of record, my sense of reality was consistently validated by those considered to be counseling experts. Independent of record, any validation favoring me was invalidated by my then wife. Undisputable evidence, and/or undeniable facts that did not align with my then wife's reality were routinely dismissed by my then wife. When my then wife was asked if there was any *possibility* that she might have a biased view of reality, she replied, "absolutely not." Interestingly, marital counseling seemed to have worsened a marriage that was becoming more and more unbearable.¹² My then wife's reality saw me as an evil, self-serving, derelict who had no family values and one who grossly mistreated his son.¹³ As painful as the following confession was

¹² *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* 2 Corinthians 12:8, 9 (NIV).

¹³ This is a glaring example where undisputable evidence, and/or undeniable facts do not align with my then wife's reality.

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(and continues to be), the need for psychological counseling was obvious. It was time to focus on the inner workings of the human mind. My corporate job included Employee Assistance Program benefits which meant that I and my then wife could employ high cost professions who focused on the human mind and who could hopefully help distinguish authentic reality from self-constructed reality (for both me and my then wife). Time with psychologist proved helpful. In brief, my reality got clearer and clearer every time I would sit through psychological sessions whether sessions were joint or individual.¹⁴ Based on expert opinion, my call was real. There were no psychological skeletons. I was not looking to hide my life struggles behind a ministry calling that did not truly exist. The call was real. Time with psychologists helped me see the delicacy of the human mind. It was becoming clear that my call to ministry included a call to focus on the human mind. I began to connect the dots between insights regarding fragile realities, time with experts who specifically focused on the human mind, and the relentless effort to alter the psychological and physiological make up of my son's mind. My call to ministry had evolved. What next?

Interdenominational Theological Center DMin Project – Research in Action

At this point, the authenticity of my call to ministry was no longer in question. Adversity validated the call. Psychological evaluation validated the call. Time spent in the call validated the call. Although the call itself was no longer in question, questions like “what next” persisted. With the understanding that my ministry needed to include some type of focus on the human mind, I began investigating schools with psychology programs. Psychology programs that were most interesting to me were *practical* programs, meaning these programs went beyond academic theory. These programs focused on academic *practice* which requires *action*. Without question, my program of choice would have to be *practical*. Also without question, my program of choice would have to be

¹⁴ Note we (myself and my then wife) researched and engaged various licensed psychologist in search of objectivity, openness and candor. We had sessions with male psychologist, with female psychologist and even had sessions that included a male psychologist and a female psychologist collaborative team. I was intentional in finding ways to determine differences between authentic realities and self-constructed realities.

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one that would not require me to move to another city/town.¹⁵ I was attracted to Interdenominational Theological Center's (ITC's) Doctor of Ministry program because I believed that this particular program would allow me to simultaneously explore my call to ministry and equip my call to ministry in *practical* ways.¹⁶ As mentioned in this article's introduction, my Doctor of Ministry project was a heuristic research study of my experience during completion of a Doctor of Ministry degree. It featured an understood divine call to engage in a particular ministry while struggling to understand what, when and how to engage it.

Specifically, this project was a study of the phenomenon of being called to engage in a praxis ministry that particularly pertains to the human mind while at the same time undergoing extreme personal difficulties related to the call and without the benefit of a clear understanding of the call or the call's direction. More specifically, this project was a study of the phenomenon of being called to engage in a praxis ministry that particularly pertains to protecting the minds of African American boys from unwarranted mind altering prescription medications.

Heuristic Research Does Not End, It Begins

One of the most powerful aspects of heuristic research is having the opportunity to answer the question: How did the researcher experience a particular phenomenon? At the time of my 2008-2011 research, I was experiencing the pain and injustice of my son being wrongly subjected to behavioral labels, wrongly diagnosed Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD), and wrongly being pressured to accept being regimented by mind altering prescription medications that were not warranted.¹⁷ I experienced pain because I understood the negative impact of behavioral labels, especially when and where it comes to African American males. Behavioral labels often cause those who are labeled to

¹⁵ As previously noted, being an accessible/accountable father was/is one of the most important aspects of my psychology.

¹⁶ Furthermore, there was no requirement for me to move to another city/town.

¹⁷ There are overwhelming numbers of proof points that support my conclusion that there are many wrongs associated with mind altering prescription medications. One of the most visible proof points can be found in seeing the growth, talent and success of my son. It is horrifying to think of the untold numbers of African American boys who have been regimented by unwarranted mind altering prescription medications.

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be discriminated against, socially ostracized, suspended from school, restrained, harmed, maimed, incarcerated and much too often as of late, murdered. I experienced injustice because I was being accused of harming the son that I was diligently trying to protect. My then wife consistently worked to bring legal action against me. I experienced both pain and injustice when standing before a judge who blatantly disrespected and racially stereotyped me while issuing unfair rulings that were contrary to the facts and independent of the evidence.¹⁸

I completed my DMin project, successfully completed and defended my project dissertation and earned my Doctor of Ministry degree May 2011. No matter the challenges, I never surrendered to the relentless pressures to medicate my son. Eventually, allegations of ADHD ceased.¹⁹ After all, there was no *real* evidence that supported ADHD allegations. Factually, there was plenty of evidence that contrasted ADHS allegations. And though the formal aspect my heuristic research may have ended, the imports of heuristic researcher were really just beginning; in accordance to research pioneer, Clark Moustakas' instructional quote stating, "In heuristic research the investigator must have had a direct, personal encounter with the phenomenon being investigated. There must have been

¹⁸ As divine fate would have it, on Saturday, November 7, 2015, I "happened" to walk past a Durham newspaper stand while grocery shopping. Prominently positioned on the front page of Durham's Herald-Sun newspaper read the following: *Judge Hill reprimanded for referring to parents as 'idiots.'* Although the reported reprimand was related to specific circumstances in a specific divorce and child custody proceeding that occurred on August 7, 2014, proof of this judge's manner of blatant disrespect was made public. Durham's Herald-Sun noted that the North Carolina Judicial Standards Commission found Hill: Made "inappropriate comments." Upchurch, Keith. 2015. Judge Hill reprimanded for referring to parents as 'idiots.' *The Herald-Sun*. November 7. Again, the North Carolina Judicial Standards Commission findings were specific to a specific complaint filed with against Hill. Note my painful and unjust encounter with Judge Hill occurred in late 2012. At that time, I witnessed others being disrespected and judged unfairly (in my view). It would be very interesting to research Judge Hill's pattern of behavior towards African Americans in general and African American males in particular.

¹⁹ *Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me. But he said to me, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."* 2 Corinthians 12:8, 9 (NIV).

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actual autobiographical connections.”²⁰ Does this not sound like an ideal approach for discovering, engaging and sustaining authentic praxis ministry? This approach was and continues to be ideal for me. My research has not ended, it is beginning.

²⁰ Clark Moustakas, *Heuristic Research: Design, Methodology, and Applications*, (Newbury Park, CA: SAGE Publications, 1990), 14.

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