DOING RESEARCH IN THE CONTEXT OF MINISTRY

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Introduction

Imagine that someone in your congregation has come to you with a URL to a website that has been intriguing her. She tells you that she is not sure the site is believable. When you investigate, you discover that this site may be teaching a version of the Christian faith that differs from orthodox belief. You ask yourself, "Who produced this? How exactly does it differ from biblical teaching? Can we call it faithful to biblical teaching?"

This is a common scenario for ministry workers in our current age of diversity. But what you may not recognize is that your investigation into this website constitutes research. So does preparation for a sermon or teaching session. Research, in fact, is a common feature of ministry. Every time you explore something with a view to making sense of it or improving your understanding of it, you are doing research.

Many of us fail to recognize, however, that our personal research ability requires development. It is not something you either have or do not have. You have to train yourself as a researcher if you wish to be effective, whether you are investigating a problem in ministry or preparing for preaching or teaching.

What follows is a compendium of suggestions to help you develop your research skills, including setting your goals, developing problem statements, finding resources, evaluating what you find, and creating a cross-reference system to use your found materials effectively in writing up your project. Hopefully, this advice, from someone who teaches research skills for a living, will help you ramp up your own abilities.

Conceptualizing Research

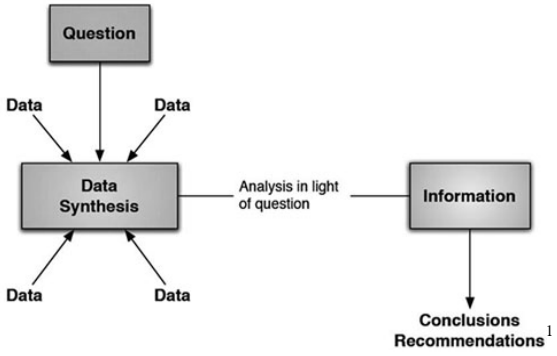
What is research? That might sound like a foolish question, but a good definition is essential and not easy. Simply getting background knowledge on a subject area is not research. Research involves a quest based in a problem. It starts with a problem statement and ends with a response to the problem.

Consider the following example: You have encountered someone who is deeply involved in an unusual new religious movement. While you could discover many facts about the movement, doing that really only builds your knowledge base. A deeper motive for studying this movement lies in the fact that you are concerned about the negative influence that it may have on those who embrace it. Genuine research should move beyond compilation of information and ask a question like

the following: "To what extent is this movement compatible with the Christian faith?" or even, "Is this movement a heresy in relation to standard Christian teaching?"

"Research" that only compiles existing information is not research. Genuine research uses information to deal with an issue, a problem, a gap in our knowledge. It targets something you cannot just look up in a book. There is often more than one potential answer to a research quest, and your task will be to find the resolution that is best supported by the evidence you have gathered. Research is, therefore, a goal-oriented investigation of a problem and is intended, through a process of information gathering and analysis, to produce a solution to that problem.

The following figure shows a model of genuine research. It can be used for any kind of organized quest. You will see that the governing concept is the use of a question to state the nature of the problem being addressed. This is followed by compilation of data intended to provide an answer to the question. The data is then analyzed to organize it as "information" (data that now is in a form to respond to the question). Out of information and further analysis comes a conclusion.



When you embark on research, whether informally or as part of an organized project, planning is essential. You might think that planning wastes time, but the opposite is the case. If you establish clear goals and a solid research design before you embark on actual research, you have a necessary foundation. This will actually speed up your process.

Determining the Scope of your Project

No research project can do everything. There are always limitations both in the breadth of what you are addressing and in the resources you will use as the basis

[1] Adapted from William Badke, *Research Strategies: Finding your Way through the Information Fog*, 6th ed. (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.com, 2017), 48.

for your quest. It is essential that you plan the scope of your project from the beginning, deciding that it will cover this, not that, and setting yourself limits on the number and type of resources that you will involve in your research. Two essential first steps are necessary: defining the problem you want to address, and setting up a roadmap for your research. The following discussion will look at how this can be done well, first with informational research and then with research using human participants.

Informational Research

Determining the scope of a research project that is primarily informational - using published sources - is challenging. If you have a tendency to want to discover everything you can about a topic or issue, you will soon be overwhelmed by the scope of the research you have to do. This is where preplanning is essential. For example, if you are investigating a troubling new theological movement, you want to focus on those aspects that appear to run counter to biblical teaching rather than studying the history of the movement or other broader aspects.

Preplanning begins with defining the problem you want to address. You need to state the problem as one thing rather than several, and express it in a single statement, usually a guiding research question. This is an essential first step if you want to clarify your goal and avoid wasting time researching aspects that you can safely avoid. If your topic is this troubling new movement, you want to make sure you know what specific problem you want to address – the extent to which it is or is not biblically sound.

Your research must have a goal that is beyond the mere act of compilation. For example, even sermon preparation or creating a Bible study is research, not compilation. You want to go beyond understanding a biblical passage and discern the passage's teaching for today and for your congregation. Thus you create a problem statement like, "What is the primary message that emerges from the passage?" Such a goal, as with all research projects, is not something you can just look up. It demands analysis, assessment of the views of others, and a decision.

This exercise of determining the nature of the problem and stating it in a single research question automatically limits the scope of your discovery to that which helps to answer the question. But you can take one further step to limit your scope: Out of your research question, develop a basic outline that will then serve as a blueprint or roadmap for the information-gathering process.

For example, your question is: Can the _____ teaching be considered to be compatible with the Biblical message? Your outline will be:

Introduction I. The Teachings of the _____ Movement II. Relevant Biblical Teaching III. Analysis of _____ in Light of Biblical Teaching Conclusion

With a solid question and a preliminary outline/guide, you now have a clear sense of what you will include and not include. You also have a clear sense of direction as you move on to the next part of your research task. Not doing these initial steps becomes a recipe for confusion and timewasting. It is well worth your time to begin with a solid agenda for your research.

Research Using Human Participants

There are times when your research may involve interaction with people rather than with print resources. The same basic starting points - defining your problem through a research question and developing an outline – still apply, but, when working with people as your data source, there are extra obligations to ensure that your research is ethical.

While you as an individual researcher are not subject to formal research ethics approval requirements as are researchers in universities, it is important to recognize that working with fellow human beings is potentially risky. The "Responsible Conduct of Research" document produced by Canada's three research granting bodies is a helpful guide to doing human participant research ethically.[2]

In general, the following ethical considerations are important when researching with human participants. First, you need free and informed consent. No one should be participating in your research out of a sense of obligation or coercion, and your participants must know what you are planning to do with them in the course of your research. All potential risks to them, whether psychological, emotional, or potential damage to reputation need to be clear from the outset.

[2] Government of Canada. Panel on Responsible Conduct of Research, "Tri-Agency Framework: Responsible Conduct of Research." Accessed September 14, 2018. http://www.rcr.ethics.gc.ca/eng/policy-politique/framework-cadre/.

Second, you need to ensure the confidentiality of the data you generate. Participants need to be sure that what they reveal to you will not be made known to the world. Third, the injunction from the medical world, "Do no harm," always applies to human participant research as well. Be sure your research will not damage your participants psychologically, emotionally, or in any other way. You should probably consult with a colleague before you embark on such research so that together you can ensure that the ethical standards of your plan are at the highest level.

Human participant research needs planning. If you are going to be interviewing people, formulate your questions in advance, both to be sure you are meeting your research goals with the questions you ask and to standardize the process so you are asking the same questions of each participant. If you are doing a survey, make sure your survey questions are clear and capable of being answered.

Finding Information Resources

Information resources in our digital age have become a minefield. Why is this the case? In the pre-digital age, most published information came to us via gatekeepers: editors and publishers who determined what was fit to publish and what was not. True, gatekeeping was not perfect, but it provided a measure of screening between authorship and publication so that we could have relative confidence about the sources we were reading.

The World Wide Web (established in 1989) broke the gatekeeping function in a variety of ways. First, anyone could publish virtually anything online without having a gatekeeper block the way. Second, the quality control of gatekeeping could be lost, making information on the Net uneven, from the highly intelligent to the profoundly stupid. Third, since we began travelling on the World Wide Web, we have struggled to find useful clues to help us differentiate the good information from the bad. Fourth, we readers have become the gatekeepers, even though we often lack knowledge of proper evaluation criteria.

With the coming of the WWW, the public was left with a two-tiered system: the information they could find through a Google or Bing search for free, and the often higher-level information locked behind paywalls and available only to those who had the finances to afford them. We can see this distinction in academic libraries, where we find, in academic databases, a wealth of information that is only

accessible because the institution has paid for it through annual license fees. You require a login, which is generally available only to current students, faculty and staff.

Most graduates of colleges, universities, and seminaries, once they have stopped being registered students, know the sinking feeling of discovering that most of the databases they could previously access are now blocked to them, because their login information is no longer recognized. Licensed databases, for the most part, are available only to students, faculty and staff of the institution. True, public libraries have some databases, and academic libraries generally offer access to non- or former students when they are physically on campus, but for most people in ministry, the days of easy access to academic databases are gone.

There are alternatives. Google is still available, though the uneven nature of what you find is a barrier. So too is Google Scholar, probably the largest academic database in the world. The problem with Scholar, however, is that users have to pay for access to many of the articles listed in search results.

A new database, Dimensions (https://app.dimensions.ai/ - released January 2018) has a filter in the left column that allows you to limit searches for academic resources to those available open access (that is, without a paywall). This database is large and offers some hope for frustrated ministry researchers.

Directory of Open Access Journals (https://doaj.org/) offers access to articles from almost 10,000 journals published for free on the Internet.

One particularly helpful source for information in ministry comes from Rob Bradshaw in England. He has established an online free set of databases for biblical studies, theology, church history, missions, and so on (see https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/blog/biblical-studies-links/gateway-resource-sites-theology/ for an index to his and related sites). Rob has sought permission from authors and publishers to make a rich array of Evangelical scholarly resources freely and legally available to everyone. His collection forms a treasure for the ministry researcher.

There are times when you may simply want basic but reliable information about topics in ministry. Here your personal library might help in providing foundational reference tools, but there are a few web portals that can be helpful. Bible Study Tools (https://www.biblestudytools.com/) while it provides a lot of older resources that are out of copyright and thus free, also has gems like *Baker's Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (https://www.biblestudytools.com/dictionaries/bakers-evangelical-dictionary/). The

Open Access Digital Theological Library (http://oadtl.org/) offers an extensive range of works, though all are out of copyright and thus quite old. Other sites of interest are the ministry section of Christianity Today (https://www.christianitytoday.com/ct/ministry/), Christian Ministries International (https://www.christianministriesintl.org/ - apologetics, new religious movements), and so on.

The kind of research you are doing will dictate the types of databases or even the types of information you require.

Evaluating Resources

Even back in the era of gatekeepers, readers had to evaluate carefully the information they acquired. Now, with gatekeepers on the decline, the onus on readers is even heavier. It is not good enough to argue that the information you are considering "feels right," "looks good," or "makes sense" and is thus believable.

Perhaps the biggest challenge to evaluating what we read is "confirmation bias," a concept investigated many years ago by Peter Wason.[3] Wason used an experimental procedure to demonstrate that people are not inclined to test their hypotheses against contradictory evidence. His work has been verified by several studies from Tversky and colleagues, who have placed the phenomenon, described as "confirmation bias," on a firm foundation of evidence.[4]

Confirmation bias colours our judgment. The phenomenon says, in essence, that we will favour evidence that agrees with what we already believe, and discount evidence that contradicts our existing belief system. What we have believed in the past tends to serve as a filter for any new information that we receive.

Did Jesus rise from the dead? Of course, you say. But what would you do if someone came up with seeming proof that he did not? Confirmation bias would tell us to respond with, "That's nonsense, because he did rise from the dead. Your evidence is flawed." This could mean that you would avoid investigating the contradicting evidence objectively. If the new "evidence" is flawed, what is the point

[3] Peter C. Wason, "On the Failure to Eliminate Hypotheses in a Conceptual Task," *Quarterly Journal of Experimental Psychology*12, no. 3 (1960): 129-140.
[4] For example, Amos Tversky, and Derek J. Koehler, "Support Theory: A Nonextensional Representation of Subjective Probability." *Psychological Review* 101, no. 4 (1994): 547-567. Retrieved from http://statweb.stanford.edu/~sabatti/Stat370/tversky.pdf

of investigating it?[5] Yet it is hard to know how you can effectively deal with or even refute contradictory evidence if you do not give it a fair hearing.

Is confirmation bias a serious problem? For some, it might not be. Confirmation bias provides stability to our worldview and gives us a basis by which to consider new information. This phenomenon, however, becomes a challenge when it causes us to dismiss anything that contradicts our firmly held beliefs, even when those beliefs may potentially be wrong. We need to counter our tendency to like only what we have already liked instead of giving serious consideration to opposing views.[6] As Adams has argued, "An unexamined faith is not worth having, for it can be true only by accident. A faith worth having is a faith worth discussing and testing."[7]

Given that we should be testing the information that comes to us, what criteria should we use? A very good starting point is to check out the qualifications, biases, and track record of the creator of the information. Who is the author, what is his/her affiliation, and so on? Here Google is a great ally to search out more information about authors and their backgrounds.

Beyond that, considering factors of credibility (characterized by information that is truthful and avoids needless bias), evidence (how the author backs up claims; points at which the author avoids or deflects counter-evidence), and so on, can help a great deal. A website from Robert Harris a Christian retired English professor provides a strong guide. While it focuses on evaluating websites, it is useful for all kinds of information.[8]

Organizing Resources

One of the most challenging parts of any research project is staring at the mess of data you have collected and trying to determine how you will organize it to make sense. The solution is to plan around what you already have as organizational tools: your initial problem statement (question or thesis) and your preliminary outline.

The research question or thesis statement reminds you of the restrictions you have set in defining your goal. If you can organize your resources so that they

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[5] For a very good presentation of the problems of, and solution to confirmation bias, view the TED Talk: Julia, Galef, "Why You Think You're Right -- Even if You're Wrong". *TEDxPSU*, 2016. Accessed October 22, 2018. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w4RLfVxTGH4.

[6] See William Badke, "Fake News, Confirmation Bias, the Search for Truth, and the Theology Student," *Theological Librarianship* 11, no. 2 (October 2018): 4-7. Retrieved from https://theolib.atla.com/theolib/article/view/519/1717.

[7] James Luther Adams, *The Prophethood of All Believers* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1986), 48.

[8] Robert Harris, "VirtualSalt: Evaluating Internet Research Resources," last modified August 16, 2018, https://www.virtualsalt.com/evalu8it.htm.

address only your problem, you have made a strong beginning. The second step involves developing your preliminary outline by expanding it with subheadings until it shows a clear path from problem to proposed solution.

With those two foundations serving as a guide, start assembling the materials you have gathered. If you are an analog (paper-oriented) person, you may have print books, printed articles, and so on. Likely you will have to reduce all this information to briefer notes, reading relevant portions of books, copying portions, writing comments, and so on. With articles, if in paper format, you can go through them with a marker and identify the truly relevant material. Then assemble your book notes and printed articles into a binder, and number all the sheets from one to whatever.

If you are more of digital person, you will scan portions of books or type digital notes. You can do the same with digital articles, capturing what you need from them. When you have done that, organize all your digital notes and scans into a single word processing document (being sure to back it up).

Now you have the foundation of an organization system that works. First, if you are print-oriented, and your notes, copies, etc., are all in a binder with the sheets numbered, create a print copy of your outline. Then read through the notes, identifying which sections are relevant to each heading in your outline. When you find a relevant section, take the page number where your section is in your notes, and write it down under the relevant heading in your outline. Then, create unique symbols for each heading (for example: @, #, $, %) and put the relevant symbols into your notes whenever you find something that would be useful for some heading in your outline. In this way you create a cross-reference system between your notes and your outline.

For digital folks, identify a symbol for each heading in your outline. Go through your notes, inserting a symbol for each part of the notes that is relevant to a section of your outline. Then you can use the "Find" function in your word processor to locate each instance of a relevant symbol.

For a slide presentation on these methods of organizing notes, see my guide at https://docs.google.com/presentation/d/1G1iwe3i1aYuoPY2HaPYb4OB8yNOEEwaJaJqYFdxsCSw/edit#slide=id.g5a85373de_0_0.

Overall, as you read through your notes, look for patterns of agreement and disagreement. Who holds this view? Who holds that view? Who agrees? Who

does not? Thinking in these terms can help you arrange your resources by the stance they take on your problem.

Writing the Project

Writing, as most of us know, is no simple task. Some of us have great speaking skills but, when it comes to putting our thoughts down in print, we find ourselves confused and uncertain. Many of us have always found writing to be one of the most difficult of human tasks.

The most common problem for most writers is simply beginning. A blank page/screen becomes an insurmountable enemy. How do I get going in such a way that I can sustain my writing until I have produced what I need to? There might be a temptation as this point not to write anything, and instead to say to yourself, "I've done the research, and the results are in my head. Why bother writing anything down?" But we all know that what we have discovered is solidified best when we preserve it in some concrete form. So write. It's the logical outcome of research.

The best way to start is to take a fresh look at your problem statement and outline (now filled with cross references to your research resources). Then break the process down into its parts and write the parts. You need an introduction, which involves the simple task of providing the reader with basic background information that ends with a statement of the problem you are trying to address. With this in mind, write the introduction.

The body is more of a challenge, but, if you have outlined well, you can take each section of the outline in turn and write it, using your sources as backups to refer to, quote, and cite. If you think of the writing as a collection of modules rather than a huge tome you have to produce in one sitting, anxiety can be reduced. Imagine it to be something like what a child does when building something with Lego. Put the pieces together in order, and you will have something beautiful.

Avoid a complex and long conclusion. The conclusion should simply sum up what you have done and state an answer to the problem you have raised. Then end it.

Conclusion

Research is something we all do on a regular basis. Research that involves a larger project presents more obstacles. But careful planning, diligent searching, and

logical construction will lead to a result that both gives you satisfaction and moves to resolve the problem you are addressing.

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