If you’re a Westerner who has visited churches and met believers in the global South, you may have run into hard questions about wealth and inequality. How is it that my brothers and sisters seem to have so little compared with what I have? What do I owe them? What is the best way to share my resources with them?

The questions are easy to pose; the answers, however, are complex. Abraham Ndungu, adjunct faculty at RBC, and Glenn Schwartz, author of *When Charity Destroys Dignity*, will delve into those questions and answers at a seminar during the Global Assembly that precedes the MWC Assembly, PA 2015, in Harrisburg this month. Ndungu and Schwartz’s seminar, “Premeditated Sustainability in Church Planting within Cross-Cultural Settings,” will explore ways to counter unhealthy dependency in missions.

“The idea of missions and particularly sustainability is an issue of concern to me,” says Ndungu, “As a Christian, as a leader, as an ordained minister with the Kenya Mennonite Church . . . I am not an outsider.” He has seen the outcome of paternalistic models which foster dependency, and he does not like it.

If the church in the global South is going to grow and do God’s work, says Ndungu, healthy, long-term solutions need to be put into place. His co-presenter, Glenn Schwartz, is the founder of World Mission Associates (WMA), a group which promotes “local sustainability in global missions.”

Unhealthy dependency, says Schwartz, “is not a terminal illness.” It can be overcome, but the ideal approach is to conduct church planting and mission work with an eye to self-reliance from the start.

Be careful, he warns, not to assume that people have nothing to give back to God. “We assume people are poor because they look poor to us,” he explains. In his work with WMA, he has seen struggling churches, poor by our standards, find their way to “standing on their own two feet.”

The road to dependency is paved with good intentions, he says. He has found that it can be almost impossible for North Americans to accept that our “compassion” might be at the root of the dependency problem. Westerners, he says, get a good feeling from helping others, yet sometimes our “compassion” overtakes the need to look carefully at how God’s resources are used.
“If our giving results in diminishing another’s ability to give, it’s a problem.”

A diminished ability to give is not the only side effect of unhealthy dependency. Ndungu is not opposed to missionary work; rather, he opposes the “perpetuation of relationships of dependency.”

Missions work in Africa has been plagued by a paternalistic, top-down approach that provides what the mission agencies think the church in Africa needs. “It’s not based on the felt needs of the local people,” says Ndungu. “It’s more of what the Western church believes they need.”

In part, the African spirit of hospitality prevents local believers from saying no to imposed leadership. But Ndungu doesn’t let the local church off the hook: “From the outset, I blame both givers and receivers, the local church and people outside.”

What’s needed, he says, is a shift in thinking. “The cure to all these ‘misfires’ on cross-cultural missions and church planting is asking one basic question: What is the driving force behind church involvement in Christian missions and church planting?”

Is the church doing the mission of God—the Missio Dei—or is it doing its own mission? How can we join in the mission of God in a way that ensures “healthy, long-term solutions for the church in the global South?”

Although missions workers have been aware of the problem of dependency for some time, some current trends are making it harder to combat. Glenn Schwartz believes that the “newly discovered mission interest in North America, England and Korea is fueling the dependency syndrome.”

Many short-term mission teams are discovering a level of poverty they’ve never seen before, he says. But it’s often relative poverty, not absolute poverty. “Short-termers are often driven by compassion,” he explains. “Before they leave to go back home, sometimes they empty out their suitcases and pockets. They develop a relationship with local people; when they return to America, they speak to churches and raise money to support the churches in the countries they went to serve.”

And the dependency continues.

Schwartz is clear that nobody should use what he is saying to avoid helping the poor. We should always be searching for meaningful ways to help the poor, he says. But often Westerners use money to solve problems, even if it’s not the best solution. “This mentality masquerades in attractive ways,” he says. But if our sole purpose is to give away money, “dependency is prolonged.”

Schwartz is skeptical of terms like interdependence and partnership. “Ask yourself in how many directions the resources flow? If resources flow in only one direction, it’s likely a sponsorship, not a partnership.”

He also wonders how a wealthy North American church and a church in Nairobi can truly be interdependent. His solution is to opt for “local-local interdependence” with other local churches and denominations in their own countries. That would be true partnership!

Ndungu disagrees. “International partnerships are not a problem. What I’m against is paternalism.” It is true that

How can we join in the mission of God in a way that ensures healthy, long-term solutions for the church in the global South?
resources should not flow one way, but “the developing world can partner with the developed world.” In fact, if the church is the body of Christ, “all the parts have to work together.”

Even churches in the North can benefit from churches in the global South. “That is what is expected for a healthy Body of Christ.”

Real partnerships require mutual cooperation, says Ndungu. Churches in developed countries can help churches in poor countries work out administrative structures “that will ensure the sustainability of the work God is doing in these countries.”

This would include teaching on giving tithes and offerings, financial management, accountability mechanisms, and ways to set up salaries and pension plans for pastors. Churches in the global South can be trained to do local fund-raising for their own projects.

Missionary work should be phased out, but in stages, says Ndungu, all with the goal of preparing nationals to do God’s work and not rely on foreigners. “Equip locals and they’ll do the job—much better.”

Schwartz has worked on these issues for over three decades and has much to say about how Westerners can use their money and their time in ways that don’t undermine self-reliance in the developing world.

For example, Western Christians can invest in the mobilization efforts of churches in the developing world, especially if the gospel’s been preached in a particular area for over one hundred years. Schwartz believes Africa is a sleeping giant: “God has blessed them to take the gospel out.”

He also recommends supporting ministries that do not have a natural constituency (radio broadcast, Bible translation, and ministries of mercy), but says “be careful not to do things for people that they can do for themselves.”

Help refugees in a way that preserves their dignity; invest in preventive health projects and look for ways to eliminate the root causes of disease and poverty. Income-generating projects and revolving-loan projects are good, but the latter work best when the funds come from people in the country itself.

Readers can visit WMA’s website to access resources on this topic at wmausa.org.

Schwartz also has a word of hope: “The good news is that the healthiest churches are not those seeking funding from outside. Africa has been shown again and again to have so many resources that it does not need to have financial partners from overseas to support its work. It’s a spiritual battle. Our gospel is adequate to bring down strongholds of poverty and unhealthy dependency.”

Ndungu hopes that participants in the seminars leading up to MWC Assembly won’t suffer from “seminar fatigue,” a symptom of which is “recommendations that go nowhere.” He believes that our mission agencies should appoint task forces to look at the ideas covered in the seminar to see what can be done, and hopes to see this happen.
“Thank You for Coming to Africa...”

by Jewel Showalter

I was sitting among several thousand international Mennonites and Brethren in Christ at the 2003 Mennonite World Conference (MWC) Assembly in Bulawayo, Zimbabwe. A tall, dark-skinned man dressed in a flowing white robe preached powerfully in French as James Krabill of Mennonite Mission Network translated into English.

I learned that the preacher was Siaka Traore, president of the Evangelical Mennonite Church of Burkina Faso, and leaned forward, eager to hear more.

I had grown up in Ethiopia, the daughter of Mennonite missionaries, and was glad to be back on the continent to experience the first MWC Assembly hosted on African soil. I wanted to hear from the leaders of the rapidly expanding church in sub-Saharan Africa.

Many of us who have lived in Africa know the danger of leaving our hearts there—charmed by the warmth of relationships unfettered by the clock, the fresh taste of tropical fruits, and the exploding colors of flame trees and bougainvillea. As a child I had dreamed of returning to Africa someday. But then as strong cries of “missionary go home” rang out and much of Africa arose to shake off its colonial masters, I was left feeling half-guilty and apologetic for my African childhood.

So I sat riveted in my seat as Traore said in his commanding voice, “If you have served as a missionary in Africa, please stand to your feet.”

Hesitantly I stood—as did dozens of others scattered across the vast auditorium.

“I want to thank you for coming to Africa,” said Traore, a former Muslim. “You brought the gospel to my people. We have never been the same. Thank you for your sacrifices, for leaving your homes and coming to Africa with the good news.”

Now I was crying, deep sobs welling up from inside. I didn’t hear another word he said.

“He thanked me. He thanked me,” I sobbed. “He’s glad we came.” Missionary mistakes are legion, and we’ve been fond of berating ourselves in today’s tolerant, skeptical world. Sure, Jesus said “go into all the world,” but we’ve certainly made a mess of things. Just think of the Crusades... all the wars... forcing religion down people’s throats... “They’re happy the way they are, leave them alone!”

But then along came Robert Woodberry.* For the past 15 years he’s been researching the effects of “conversionary Protestant” mission work around the world. To the surprise and chagrin of the secular world, Woodberry shows quite conclusively that the movement had a strong, positive influence on liberal democratization around the world—and has in fact been central to it.

He checked and double checked the variables, but the evidence is statistically irrefutable. Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant
Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past 200 years are on average more economically developed today...

Areas where Protestant missionaries had a significant presence in the past 200 years are on average more economically developed today, have comparatively better health, lower infant mortality, lower corruption, greater literacy, higher educational attainment (especially for women), and more robust membership in nongovernmental associations.

"The results were so strong, they made me nervous," Woodberry said. "I expected an effect, but I had not expected it to be that large or powerful."

Woodberry’s research shows that even in places where few people converted to Christianity, missionaries still had a profound economic and political impact. But he nuanced it to say that the positive effect of missionaries on democracy applies only to "conversionary Protestants." Protestant missionaries financed by the state, as well as Catholic missionaries prior to the 1960s, had no comparable effect in the areas where they worked.

“One of the main stereotypes about missions is that they were closely connected to colonialism,” Woodberry said. “But Protestant missionaries not funded by the state were regularly very critical of colonialism.”

For example, missionaries in China worked to end the opium trade which Britain fought to expand. In the West Indies and other colonies, missionaries played a key role in ending the slave trade. Back home, their allies passed legislation that returned land to the native Xhosa people of South Africa and also protected tribes in New Zealand and Australia from being wiped out by settlers.

"I feel confident saying none of those movements would have happened without missionaries mobilizing them," Woodberry said. "Missionaries had a power base among ordinary people. They were the ones that transformed these movements into mass movements."

Of course, he notes that most missionaries didn't set out to be political activists. They weren't trying to introduce democracy. Locals often associated Christianity with their colonial abusers, so in order to be effective at evangelizing, missionaries distanced themselves from the colonists. They campaigned against abuses because they loved the people to whom they went.

Joel Carpenter, director of the Nagel Institute for the Study of World Christianity at Calvin College, agrees. “Few missionaries were in any systemic way social reformers. They were first and foremost people who loved other people. They cared about other people, saw that they'd been wronged, and wanted to make it right.”

Then I had another memory. This time I was sitting in a Global Consultation on World Evangelization in South Africa in 1997. Our hosts were a white British man and a black South African. They enacted a skit from the early missionary days.

“What’s your name,” the helmet-topped British man asks the half-clad native.

Of course we all cringed and groaned at the blatant cultural insensitivity—as they’d anticipated. Yet there the two of them stood—jointly chairing this huge global consultation. Joking back and forth with each other, calling the shots, highly capable mission leaders.

Again I was moved to tears. Yes, we’ve made mistakes, but somehow the good news got through. And that’s why we keep going.

That’s why there was a REACH team in Nepal when the devastating earthquake struck. That's why “conversionary” Mennonites planted circles of churches in Central and South America. Now Nicaraguan young people whose own parents could hardly read are serving as teachers in Asia.

Truly the gospel transforms individuals and whole societies—and it feels good to have statistics to back it up!

*Information for this article on Robert Woodberry’s research was drawn from “The Surprising Discovery About Those Colonialist, Proselytizing Missionaries” by Andrea Palpant Dilley in the January 8, 2014 issue of Christianity Today.

Jewel Showalter serves along with her husband Richard as a Global Consultant for Rosedale Mennonite Missions. She loves her family (three married children/14 grandchildren) and telling stories of God’s work around the world.