When you’re the Conservative Mennonite Conference, it’s rare that somebody knocks on your door and says, “Hey, I’ve been reading about you and I like what I see. I’d like to plant a church with you. What do you think?”

What’s rarer still? When that somebody is a twenty-something guy from Boston who thinks Anabaptist ideals in action would be appealing to his unchurched neighbors.

It’s rare, but it actually happened! Two years ago, Timothy Colegrove went looking for a denominational home that matched what he believed and landed on CMC’s website. Our combination of Anabaptist beliefs and evangelical outreach seemed like a good fit for Tim and his wife, Alice Rouse Colegrove, even though they knew that culturally it might get a little complicated. They’re fast-talking, high-powered urban dwellers, after all—not your typical CMC profile.

These two care about theology, though, and theology is a potent force. Beliefs leap over small obstacles like an unfamiliar last name or no Mennonites in your background.

What follows is a free-form introduction to and conversation with Tim and Alice, who are launching a church plant in their Jamaica Plain neighborhood under the auspices of the CMC.

Who is this knocking at our door?

Together, Alice and Tim bring a powerful combination of gifting and experience to the task of church planting (see sidebar). For the last four years, they’ve worked with homeless youth and young adults in Boston through InnerCHANGE, a Christian order among the poor. They’ve acted as advocates and friends for young people on the streets, trying to provide “a healthy community where healing and hope can be found.”

Now they sense a call to step back from their street ministry and focus on building a church in their neighborhood, which they describe as “incredibly diverse” and which they enjoy tremendously.

Here’s how they describe that call: “Our vision is to plant a multi-ethnic evangelical Anabaptist church in the city of Boston committed to discipling new believers, breaking down socio-economic barriers, and gathering an eclectic community around Jesus’ table.”

It will, they say, take “outside-the-box thinking,” but their goal is “to build a church where people from all walks of life can come and experience new life in Christ.”

They see a “great need for church growth and Gospel witness” in Boston and believe that the CMC’s “historic emphasis on peace and simplicity” uniquely position them “to offer a fresh angle on Christian faith. . . . Boston is rich soil for Kingdom movements towards racial reconciliation, peacemaking, and economic justice.”

Why did Tim and Alice come knocking on CMC’s door?

While Tim was still in seminary, he started looking for a denomination that reflected the beliefs he held. When he and Alice sat down and talked about it, he said, they realized they were “in the Anabaptist camp.”

Tim listed some of those beliefs: “Our commitment to pacifism led to other commitments that we shared with Anabaptists throughout history. We were convicted about baptism on confession of faith, the priesthood of all believers interpreting Scripture in community. . . . We’re drawn to the legacy, to the position on divorce and remarriage reflected in the CMC’s values. . .”

Alice added, “And there’s separation of church and state.”

*something new
Tim agreed. “We value that Mennonites are relatively apolitical, not very partisan. We appreciate that. We want to be part of a group that has an evangelical feel, but is not loyal to a political party.”

**Tim and Alice’s excellent adventure in Belleville!**

**Beacon:** You found us online and pursued us. And now you’ve been to conference in Belleville (Pennsylvania). Talk about immersion! Now that you’ve met us, what do you think?

“Our impression is still good,” said Alice. “I think again, people don’t realize what they have, the beauty of the CMC, and why it’s different and necessary and even relevant.”

When some people found out Tim and Alice wanted to plant a CMC church in Boston, they said, “Why us? Are you sure?”

Reflecting on that, Alice said, “Yeah, we are. We tried to have a lot of conversations with people about the beautiful things CMC carries on, and they would say, ‘Yeah, that is great. This is who we are — hey, you’re right.’”

Humility, added Alice, is a beautiful strength and weakness. You can understate your own strengths so much.

Timothy wondered aloud if it was humility, or possibly fear. “CMC has some very distinct character compared to other conferences and denominations,” he said. “Its long history formed it into who it is today. All that history can sometimes cause people to be nervous about getting excited about what they believe.” It’s hard, he said, for people to say “this is who we are and this is why we believe it, and [we] think it’s wonderful.”

**Beacon:** Some people who’ve grown up in our conference or as Mennonites can find it hard to distinguish between what is Anabaptism and what is culture. It’s often difficult to discern what is strictly cultural and what is theological.

Tim responded, “I think that’s a strength we bring to the conference. We had no Anabaptist convictions till six years ago. We bring the unique perspective of someone who comes to the Mennonite family by conviction, not by blood.

“I stumbled on CMC; it wasn’t because my family had been conservative Mennonite or Amish Mennonite for the last two hundred years. . . . We see the beauty without all the ethnic baggage.”

Alice spoke up. “One thing that was interesting about the conference itself — I did not experience in the main sessions anything different than a lot of evangelical churches I have been to. I’m very grateful that Eli (our youngest, who just turned one) afforded me a lot of time in the nursery and hallway. Stepping out of those sessions, I was able to connect with a lot of people, and that is where I fell in love with the conference. When I met the people who were there, I got so excited. I thought, ‘Wow, these are amazing people.’”

Tim echoed Alice’s thoughts on meeting “really amazing people. The connections we made with people one on one — the people are just gold, really quality. They love Jesus, they’re passionate and concerned, in a good way, with where CMC is going.” He mentioned several contacts they made, describing them as “wonderful people with great character.” Yet he was “surprised by the contrast in programming that was typically evangelical, but not reflective of what makes CMC unique. It didn’t reflect the Anabaptist side of CMC as we were hoping.”

Alice said in their one-on-one interactions they saw the Anabaptist side, and both of them listed what she meant by that: “humility, valuing the separation of church and state, the peace movement, simplicity, a high view of Scripture.”

They would both love to see more training at conference, perhaps through workshops that would “train the trainers” so they leave with the sense that “here’s something you can bring back to your community.”

**How do they envision their church planting?**

Alice: “Part of our vision for a church will springboard from the ministry we’ve had with homeless youth and folks on the street. We would love to be able to have a church where they are welcome . . . where church and non-church people, poor and rich, intellectuals and non-intellectuals come around the table.” Tim and Alice would love to see CMC talking about “what it means to have a priesthood of all believers, what it means to have very different kinds of people who come around the table.” It’s crucial, they said, to believe “we do have something to share there.”

Ideally, they want to be in a denomination that “empowers us to empower others through the priesthood of all believers.”

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Below: Alice began sitting on sidewalks, learning from individuals who are homeless, when she was 15. She has a Doctorate in Public Health from Boston University and has been working with homeless young adults for over ten years. Her interests include ending homelessness, DIY motherhood, art, and music. In addition to presenting lectures and workshops on homeless youth issues at several national and international forums, Alice is well connected locally to Boston’s street-community, academia, community organizations, and churches.

Above: Tim has a Master of Divinity from Gordon-Conwell Theological Seminary and has served with InnerCHANGE from 2010 to the present as a community leader and street pastor among homeless young people. His interests include Anabaptist theology, evangelism, Bible study, and church history. In his free time, he enjoys reading, a good cup of coffee, unicycling, and geocaching.
Alice brings over a decade of experience in working on issues of homelessness and public policy to this topic of empowerment. She has worked with young people on the streets, service providers, churches, and academics; at the policy level, she’s worked at the state level in Massachusetts and with the governments of Romania and Peru.

“All those voices need to be heard,” she explained, “to create a bigger picture.” Navigating those worlds takes skill. “God has blessed me with the ability to speak the languages of those various worlds. I have navigated that in the secular world and I can bring that to the church, meeting folks from a variety of backgrounds across the table.”

Tim added, “Secular people are working on this. The church should be even more capable of doing that. . . . It’s a challenge to the church that secular groups are able to come together. We’d like to see a congregation that meets that challenge.”

Alice said, “At the policy level, it’s not only a good idea [that the poor are included in discussions] . . . the poor are required to be there. Is that the same in the church?”

Tim said they want to make “intentional decisions that give legs to our beliefs about everybody getting involved.” It’s easy to give lip service to the priesthood of all believers, “but we don’t always make decisions that make those things visible in our church life. We want to form a church where we are really thinking deeply about how we can give our theology legs as Mennonites. What does it look like if we really believe in separation of church and state? Peacemaking – what does that mean? . . . In our community, how is that lived out?”

Their focus will be on proclaiming the Gospel and making disciples in Jamaica Plain.

*Beacon: How does this tie in with the work you’ve been doing with the homeless?*

Tim explained that there already are “homeless churches, outdoor churches. The drawback is they don’t bring any relational wealth or social capital to the people on the street. . . . It’s hard to overcome the barriers of addiction, poverty, lack of education, unless you have people who can support you in that. We want to build a church that can do that.”

Alice used the parable of the good Samaritan: “Part of our job is being the Samaritan, sitting with the broken, tending to their wounds. But we still need an inn to take them to. An inn is not just filled with the broken, it’s filled with all sorts of people. We want our friends to come from the streets and find healing, and we want folks who are stable to be with them.”

**How can the CMC help Tim and Alice?**

Tim explained that they brought their church-planting brochure to conference to generate interest. Their hope was that “somebody from CMC would grasp hold of that vision and want to be a part of it, and would at least visit us and see if this might be a place where they and their family might be able to make headway. We’d really like to have a partner here on the ground with a background in the conference.”

They’re hoping the connections they made at conference and with RMM will turn into a conversation about church planting in general over the next few months. Having a team that is excited and intentional about church planting, vision casting, and practical strategy and that can serve as “a springboard for discussion” would be a huge help.

But they need more than that. Alice said she’s excited about a cohort, but “very scared about being alone. We love the CMC. We’re encouraged and we think it could be applicable here in the Northeast. But we’re still by ourselves.” Conversations on Skype with other church planters will help, and “visits are wonderful,” but she is nervous. “We want people to join us – we’d love for CMCers to join us! We can find people in Boston to join us, but it’d be nice if there were people there to explain why CMC is great.”

**Anything else they would like us to know?**

One challenge Tim and Alice face is communicating about the conference in their context. “It’s really difficult. People hear the name and what they think is, ‘You’re an Amish Republican?’”

The word ‘conservative’ basically “communicates a political position” in their setting, said Tim. “Right from the start the name Conservative Mennonite Conference communicates something that actually isn’t reflective of
The Coop

By Jeremy Miller

All parents have goals for their kids. Some are fanatical about raising kind kids and others about raising honest kids. I am doggedly determined that my children never assume the grocery store grows their food. Last year I ordered a foraging book on “Edible North American Plants.” Something in me felt liberated and manly knowing I could lose our family in the great outdoors and survive on grilled cattail. Unfortunately, foraging in theory was more fun than the reality of trying to figure out if I was picking the poisonous berries or the really healthy kind.

All has not been lost. My drive to create a self-sufficient family got a recent boost when we became responsible for a mobile chicken coop. It should be noted that my wife doesn’t share my passion for raising kids who can survive in the wild. She claims our household is the wild and thus wasn’t overly impressed with additional wildlife on our property. In my estimation, however, this endeavor has been a roaring success. Each morning I tow the coop to a fresh plot of land, fill the water, and let the production begin. Later in the morning the kids sprint out to the coop, open the hatch, and check for eggs. Their egg gathering exuberance has led to a few needed corrections. There was the egg that flew out of Judah’s hand as he excitedly waved his trophy about.

There was also the morning that Sadie got up bright and early, went downstairs, unlocked the back door, strolled barefooted across the yard … in 40 degree weather, checked the coop, walked back up stairs, curled up with Sarah and informed her that “the chickens haven’t laid their eggs yet” as her icicled feet dropped room temperature by 20 degrees.

In spite of the hiccups and additional effort required, there is something invigorating about participating in the process of acquiring our food. It seems to me that this principle of participation is true with most things we care about. Families that expend extra effort seeking Jesus together are rewarded with greater insight, passion and care. Husbands and wives who choose to invest the hard work of extended conversations and intentional activity together reap the rewards of deeper marriages. The application of this principle of participation applies to all areas of our lives. Extra time invested in Kingdom activity gives us a greater sense of ownership and adds value to the process. May God bless us in proportion to our investment.

Jeremy Miller is the pastor of Mennonite Christian Assembly in Fredericksburg, Ohio. He and Sarah are the parents of three children.

what the conference is. Maybe evangelical Mennonite or evangelical Anabaptist might be better?

“They always tell you with church planting that it’s not so great that people have to engage with your denomination’s name… We’re thinking about it a lot here. We want people to be able to say, hey, we’re a part of this group, without people being nervous about the name.”

On the other hand, they’ve thought of “leveraging the name in a healthy way,” using it to clarify their beliefs and also to “blow people’s paradigms wide open.” If they hosted an interfaith dinner at their house, people would be surprised and take note, “because nobody here is going to be expecting conservative Mennonites to host an interfaith dinner.” They could do the same thing by having a workshop on conflict resolution. “We’d be using the name creatively, rather than trying to bury it. We have to be clear about our identity.”

We’ve opened the door …

And Tim and Alice have entered in. They’re eager to do this. Please keep them in your prayers, and if you’re at all curious about how you can help them, contact them at timothy.colegrove@gmail.com or alice.colegrove@gmail.com.