

## **The Beginnings of the Free Faculty of Reformed Theology in Aix-en-Provence in 1974**

*Or, Travels with Eugène*

Due to some inaccuracies surrounding the origins of the Faculty of Reformed Theology in Aix, here's my account of how the first teaching team came together...<sup>1</sup>

When I arrived in Aix in September 1972, I felt like I had landed on a foreign planet despite a year of studies I had done in Geneva before going to Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia. The adaptation for Alison and I was made easier thanks to the kindness of those who welcomed us.

In particular, I quickly formed a genuine friendship with Eugène Boyer, an evangelist serving the churches in France. He lived with his wife in the apartment where our family would end up living for over thirty years. I was just starting my first ministry (which also turned out to be my last, though I didn't know it at the time!). I thought I was there for a year or two, but as Ecclesiastes (9:11) says, "time and chance happen to all » and the Lord had other plans.

The Protestant Theological Faculty offered extension courses, but it was clear to both Eugène and myself that there was a need for a seminary that provided on-site studies.

With the agreement of Pierre Filhol, President of the Faculty trustees, we embarked on two "tours of France" to connect with potential teachers.

Traveling with Eugène Boyer in his Mercedes diesel was an experience. Not only did we never know when we'd leave or arrive, but the coffee breaks to refuel were sometimes long... because Eugène took the opportunity to evangelize the gas station attendants. Through these journeys, I learned a lot about the French churches, their "servants," and the culture.

In the spring of 1973, we met with Pierre Courthial, pastor of the Church of the Annunciation (a member of the Reformed Church of France, ERF) at his home in Passy (Avenue du Colonel Bonnet, Paris 16th). I had never seen such an apartment, with high ceilings and mirrored hallways.

When we shared our vision of founding a confessional Reformed Faculty in Aix, P. Courthial asked us to clarify what its confessional foundation would be. He was curious whether we were Anglo-Saxons affected by the southern sun! He promised to

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<sup>1</sup> In some places one can read that Pierre Chaunu of the Sorbonne founded the Seminary or that it was Pierre Marcel. Both are inexact.

give it some thought, which he did by consulting Pierre Marcel and Aaron Kayayan, pastors of the Reformed Church of France in the Paris region.

Our journey then continued to Switzerland, to Neuchâtel and Huémoz, where we met Pierre Berthoud, who was working at L'Abri with Francis Schaeffer.

On a second trip to Paris, we had lunch with the Courthials, where the matter was almost settled. We also met Marie de Védrines, who worked at the Bank of France and who, with Pierre Courthial and Henri Blocher, was part of the editorial team for the *Ichthus* journal. She would later become, in 1981, the Academic Secretary of the Faculty, succeeding Mme. Filhol, and had held this role for a few years.

Through these travels with Eugène Boyer, contacts were made with individuals who would become along with Peter Jones (who arrived in Aix in the fall of 1973), François Gonin (pastor in Aix), and Pierre Filhol (also from Aix), the founding members of the new Faculty. The rest is history—or myth.

Paul Wells

## **How did we end up there?**

*Alison Wells*

Paul left Liverpool in September 1969 to study theology at Westminster Seminary in Philadelphia, with a Master's degree in French literature in hand. At the time, he had no plan other than to return to his homeland to pursue pastoral ministry there.

However, theology studies can change a man, and Paul was redirected toward teaching theology (something he had never thought of), following the advice of Professor Edmund Clowney, president of Westminster Seminary.

Moving to France was a different step altogether. Several factors were involved, including meeting Eugène Boyer, an evangelist-pastor who had already been in France for about twenty years. Boyer had been tasked by a group of pastors and members of the Evangelical Reformed Churches (including Pierre Filhol) to find some candidates capable of teaching theology in the south of France. After a fruitless tour of the United States, a chance encounter allowed him to meet Professor Clowney. He quickly explained his dilemma, and something clicked with Clowney. Alison also had a degree in French... and so Clowney urged them to go to France to explore any possible opportunities.

No sooner said than done. Freshly graduated in theology, Paul went to Aix-en-Provence at the end of June 1972, coincidentally on the very day that the trustees of the former seminary which had closed 1964 were meeting. Despite his age, they proposed that Paul come to Aix for a year, to teach theology by extension courses in churches to gauge the interest for reopening the seminary.

So, in September 1972, we moved to the third floor of the Faculty of Protestant Theology. Together with Eugène Boyer, Paul traveled in southern France, teaching courses in places like Alès, Nîmes, Marseille, Vauvert, and elsewhere.

Around this time, a future student who had heard about the plan to establish a new seminary had the bold idea of asking if he could start classes in the fall of 1973. It seemed like putting the cart before the horses, but then he was joined by a friend—Paul-Aimé Landes, who would later become president of the Evangelical Reformed Churches—and four others the project became a reality.

So the 1973-1974 academic year saw Paul's one-year contract renewed and the preliminary launch of a new theology Faculty. Paul taught systematic theology and Hebrew, while François Gonin, pastor at rue de la Masse in Aix, taught church history. Eugène Boyer taught practical theology.

In the meantime, it was necessary to spread the word about the project to churches and individuals who wanted to see a theology faculty established to train a new generation of pastors. It was important to find future candidates, and seek funds to finance the project. The mailing of 5,000 leaflets (folded by hand, with addresses typed on a machine) generated enough interest for the project's initiators to feel hopeful.

It was also necessary to prepare the premises, which had been poorly maintained. Paul and Eugène worked on the top floor of the seminary building. By knocking down the wall separating the classroom from the library, they created a new library, freshly carpeted and furnished with new shelves. Clean and newly renovated, it also served as a classroom, in addition to the "dining hall" on the ground floor. Their renovations extended to the attic above the provençal villa, where they installed flooring and shelving between the beams to create a periodicals room.

Donors came in impressive numbers, often with small contributions and commitments to continue. Pierre Courthial agreed to come as professor of practical theology for the 1974 school year. Peter Jones, having completed his Ph.D at Princeton and his wife Rebecca, were the first missionaries of Mission to the World, prepared to come to France, with the support of Presbyterian churches in the United States.

These are some of the factors that explain how things started to fall into place for the founding of the *Faculté Libre de Théologie Réformée* (Free Faculty of Reformed Theology) in 1974.