

JULY 15, 2009

Minute for Mission

Remembering Our Huguenot Heritage



The tower of Constance in Aigues Mortes, France, was a prison for Marie Duran for 38 years. Photo courtesy of the PC(USA)

As we observe the 500th anniversary of John Calvin's birth in 2009, it seems fitting to recall our Huguenot heritage.

In 1730, a 15-year-old Huguenot girl from Bouchet-de-Pransles was taken from her home to the Tower of Constance in a town called Aigues Mortes, not far from the Mediterranean Sea. The tower, which also served as a lighthouse, had been converted to a women's prison. The girl's name was Marie Durand, and her crime was having a brother who was a Protestant pastor.

The upper room of the tower, where the women prisoners were kept, received light and air from narrow windows. The tower was very cold in the winter and very hot in the summer. Women considered heretics were tortured in the tower by the authorities. Not all of the women were Christian, but Marie's faith served as an inspiration for all who were held there. For 38 years she served as spiritual leader for the prisoners in the tower. She nursed the sick, wrote letters for those who could not write, and persuaded the authorities to allow them to have a psalter from which she would read psalms aloud every evening. She encouraged the prisoners to sing Huguenot hymns. Her constant faith was a blessing to all the women in the prison. The women were finally released from the prison on December 26, 1767.

Led by two Protestant pastors in Nazi-occupied France during World War II, the people of the village of Le Chambon welcomed Jewish refugees into their homes and into their lives, at great risk to themselves. The pastors subsequently served time in a concentration camp, but they never revealed the identities of the Jewish people among them.

A movie called *Weapons of the Spirit* takes us to Le Chambon to meet some of the heroic people who protected their Jewish neighbors. When asked what motivated them to risk their lives for the sake of others, they remembered that their own Huguenot ancestors had been persecuted and had been forced to seek shelter and hide from the government authorities. They said that their actions came from the belief that every human being is precious in God's sight. They never considered their actions to be heroic; they merely did what their faith taught them to do.

Together, with more than 700 million Reformed Christians throughout the world, we give thanks for the stories of faith and courage of our Huguenot ancestors.

Kathy Reeves

Associate for Mission, Presbyterian Women

Louisville, Kentucky