The reconciliation of ideologically opposed sides sufficient that they might coexist peacefully with one another is always a challenge to those in authority. Such divisions destabilise social and political relationships within a polity and threaten the authorities’ ability to govern. Different strategies might work better than others in resolving and calming the situation but, even then, they might do so only for a time. Such was the challenge for the monarchy faced by the consequences of confessional hostility in sixteenth-century France. In order to understand the nature of the divisions which the French crown was trying to appease, it is necessary to consider the circumstances and events which shaped relations between the faiths in the decades preceding the wars. The progress of the Reformation in France was slow and piecemeal by European standards. It was not until the mid-century that it would gain the momentum which established the Reformers as a formidable presence in the kingdom and, ultimately, made war possible. So why was the position of the Reformed Church sufficiently assured by the early 1560s that the crown felt it necessary to appease its adherents? How were royal policy decisions about the best way to proceed reached, and what obstacles were strewn along the contentious path to peace?

The Growth of Reform

By the beginning of the French religious wars in 1562, and the efforts to prevent and to pacify them, the Reformed Church was Calvinist and its members were referred to as Huguenots. This apparent uniformity, however, conceals the patchwork nature of what preceded it. During the early decades of the French Reformation, many different strains of heterodoxy existed, but no coherent movement seems to have developed.
The experience of these years nevertheless shaped the royal response to religious pluralism in the kingdom, as well as determining the ultimate triumph of Calvinism among those who agitated for reform. Despite several decades of vigorous growth, and official if sporadic persecution, it was only from the mid-1550s that the Reformed Church in France became sufficiently organised and visible to be perceived as a significant threat to the French establishment. Local studies have confirmed that by the early 1560s congregations were growing at an impressive rate. The adherence of a large section of the nobility, crucial for the protection it afforded the movement in later years, also occurred at this time. Accompanying the Reformed Church’s expansion, incidents of confessional dissent and clashes between the faiths became more frequent. Urban unrest, in particular between congregations, was on the increase. During the same period, the crown moved from a position of repression to conciliation, due partly to the rapidly changing political climate at the centre, following the unexpected death of Henry II, as well as the increasing confessional chaos in the realm at large.

As organised local groups began to exert pressure for recognition of and provision for their churches, it was to Geneva that they would increasingly turn for assistance. Nevertheless, the Calvinist Church did not always find ‘its children’ in France easy to control. Geneva played a central role, however, in the conversion of those who would later form the Huguenot noble leadership during the wars. By the late 1550s, the Châtillon brothers Gaspard de Coligny and François d’Andelot had embraced the Reform. Furthermore, the religious sympathies of their wives were crucial in cementing this attachment, as was true of the leading women in other noble families. Jeanne d’Albret and Eléonore de Roye, consorts of the Bourbon princes Anthony of Navarre and Louis, prince of Condé, respectively, are not only said to have been more sincere in their profession of faith than their husbands, but played a leading role as Huguenot patrons and negotiators in their own right. The commanders Antoine and Jacques de Crussol, successive dukes of Uzès, were brought up in a Calvinist household directed by their mother. Such figures, and others like them, were not only to take up the military leadership of the Reformed cause during the religious wars, but were to afford protection in other ways, as well as opportunities for worship, to burgeoning Huguenot congregations. Crucially, they were directly involved in the negotiations preceding, as well as the enforcement of, the royal edicts of pacification.

As congregations grew from the mid-1550s, so services became much more difficult to conceal. Confidence in their growing numbers (as well