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CREDAL WITNESS IN AFRICAN AND ASIAN CONTEXTS (1963-1980)

I. INTRODUCTION (M.R. Spindler)

The present issue of Exchange is essentially a collection of official statements and testimonies produced by African and Asian churches during the period 1963 - 1980.

Let me first explain why and how this collection was originally prepared.

1.1. A Study Project of the I.I.M.O.

In 1979 the Interuniversity Institute for Missiological and Ecumenical Research in Leiden and Utrecht, the Netherlands, launched a new study project on "Credal Witness in Context".

The project was meant to be a follow-up of two ecumenical studies, firstly a study on 'Giving Account of the Hope that is within Us' carried out by the World Council of Churches Commission on Faith and Order; secondly a study on the experiences of 'Common Witness', sponsored by the Joint Working Group of the World Council of Churches and the Secretariat for Promoting Christian Unity of the Roman Catholic Church.

The first study was completed at the Bangalore meeting of the Commission on Faith and Order (1978); the second study was completed at the Venice consultation on 'Common Witness' (1979). At both occasions, the feeling was expressed that the diversity of testimonies was much greater than the limited amount of selected texts could make us imagine. In the meantime, agreed documents had to be produced by the aforementioned meetings, A Common Account of Hope (1978) on the one hand, Common Witness (first published in 1981) on the other hand. It was clear, however, that these documents were not yet based upon a complete survey of existing testimonies, and that still new statements were continuously being produced by Churches around the world. Although intended to be
functional in their own direct context, these local statements have something to say to other Christians elsewhere in the world in their search for identity and credibility. Local statements of faith and hope make a claim of truth on the whole message of the Church Universal. A common account of the hope that is within us – as a global fellowship of Christian Churches in the world – can only be called truly common when all partial and local accounts can find their legitimate place in it. Lukas Vischer rightly notes that such testimonies may be diverse to the point of contradicting one another (Sharing in one Hope, Bangalore 1978, p. 27). The fear of excessive diversity, however, does not justify a moratorium on new formulations of the Christian faith and hope in the course of a continuing history. Indeed, new texts are composed, and some texts which were not known earlier come to the surface of the ecumenical ocean. The study project of the I.I.M.O. aimed at discovering and collecting new creeds and testimonies of Christian Churches in the whole world, with a special focus on credal statements from Third World Churches, in line with the special expertise of our Institute. A first exploration resulted in the publication, for private circulation, of a collection of statements of 'Credal Witness in Context', prepared by P.A.P.E. Kattenberg (Credaal getuigen in Context, Leiden/Utrecht : Interuniversitair Instituut voor Missiologie en Oecumenica, 1980, 277 pp). All documents were published in their original language. In a second stage, we decided to continue and extend the project by including new statements and by trying to offer a comparative survey of the most significant texts. Our study project finally resulted in the publication of two Research Pamphlets in our series, both prepared by Piet Hoogeveen : Belijden in Context I. 37 Nieuwere geloofsbelijdenissen 1963 - 1980 (Confessing in Context I. Thirty-seven recent confessions of faith 1963 - 1980); Belijden in Context II. Tendenzen en motieven in het actuele christelijke belijden (Confessing in Context II. Trends and recurring themes in today's Christian confessing). This last book is a comparative analysis of more than sixty statements of faith and related documents, of which only thirty-seven are published in the first book. Actually, other agencies were conducting research in the same area.