The task I have been given is "to make a specific input about the historical context of our ecumenical witness in this land." I have been asked to be brief and speak "with a light touch" - "to tell a story rather than a lecture." All I can hope to do is give a lightning sketch of where we have come from, as an attempt to help us understand who we are in 1985, so that we can hopefully see more clearly some of the possible choices we can make to shape the future.

In talking of the Church in the history of New Zealand I want to make use of some gardening terminology to help root our story in our context. I hope that this will suggest some helpful images which will act as pointers to some of the forces, people and situations which have shaped our Christian experience. While I want to suggest seven ages I hope that the picture of the Church in 1985 will not end up looking like Shakespeare's decrepit old man in his seventh age:

> "second childishness, and mere oblivion,
> Sans teeth, sans eyes, sans taste, sans everything."

1. "In the beginning God created ..."

Where do we begin our story? Keith Sinclair begins A history of New Zealand with a song sung by Te Rauparaha of Kupe, the story of Papa and Rangi and creation, the fishing expedition of Maui and the catching of Te Ika a Maui - the North Island. Just as the history of the tangata whenua did not begin with the arrival of pakeha voyagers, so the religious experience of the Maori people did not start with the preaching of the missionaries. The Totara and Kauri stood tall and their roots went deep long before Abel Tasman or James Cook sighted Aotearoa. Mana and tapu were an essential part of Maori religious experience long before Marsden and Kendall came with their Bible and preaching.

The history of Christianity is the story of people's experience of God in different times, places and contexts. While in one sense Christian history is particularly concerned with the people of God who are followers of Jesus Christ - in another sense this story does not just begin with the events associated with that man in the first century. The Christian Bible begins with the Jewish experience of God - "In the beginning God created the heavens and the earth." A starting point for an indigenous theology for this land and for this people is creation and the religious experience of the Tangata whenua.

That gives us our first period - what I have called "the beginning".

2. The sowing of seeds, 1814 - c.1860.

The second period I have called the sowing of seeds. This was the missionary era when Evangelical missionaries from the Anglican Church Missionary Society and the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society came with the intention of converting Maoris. Their starting point reflected their own theological and cultural world view. They talked in Marsden's words of Maoris as "strangers to the doctrines of Divine Revelation" and the need for "civilization" to "pave the way for the introduction of the Gospel".[1]

Scotland; John Wesley's Notes on the New Testament and the first four volumes of his sermons served as the touchstone for Methodist teaching, doctrine and practice; the Tridentine Mass a focus of Roman Catholic worship.

The divisions of the old world were brought to the new - denominationalism and sectarianism. Yet this was a new situation where enforced religious pluralism required new patterns of organisation. This is most clearly seen in Selwyn's bold experiment with synodical government, culminating in the foundation of the "Church of the Province of New Zealand" (as it later came to be called) "by voluntary compact". Establishment by law in the colonial setting was quite unacceptable although establishment patterns of action and thinking were to linger on.

The regional nature of settler society left a definite imprint on the churches in this period, which is still evident today in a way which contributes to the uniqueness of the Church in New Zealand. The Presbyterian influence in Otago and Southland; Anglican ties with the Canterbury Settlement and Christchurch; Roman Catholic identity on the West Coast; the involvement of Methodists in the settlement of Taranaki; Bohemians at Puhoi; Scots at Waipu; Lutherans at Upper Moutere, Norsewood and Dannevirke.

Divisions within denominations were also imported: Evangelicalism and Churchmanship amongst Anglicans; four varieties of Methodism (Wesleyan, Primitive, Bible Christian and Free Methodists); French Marist and Irish differences amongst Roman Catholics. The bitter disruption of Scottish Presbyterians in 1843 had minimal effects on New Zealand Presbyterianism although they were divided geographically by the Waitaki River into two churches from 1863 until they were united in 1901.

4. "Digging in " or "Taking Root" 1877 - 1919.

The pioneering period placed great demands on the Church with the erection of buildings, the establishment of ministry, and the isolation of communities from one another. At the end of the century, however, the French writer Andre Siegfried noted that: "No tradition has remained so strong in New Zealand as the religious one. Churches swarm there...."[2]. But nominality was very high even in the nineteenth century, with only about 25% of the population regular church attenders.[3]

Churches had little creative input into the life of society. The Education Act in 1877 resulted in a trinitarian formula, that primary education was to be "free, compulsory and secular". Sectarian division, particularly the Roman Catholic/Protestant divide, rather than militant secularism resulted in the "secular clause". Churches were unable to find common ground and the Bible-in-schools issue was to absorb a tremendous amount of energy from the evangelically oriented denominations over the subsequent fifty years. At the same time Roman Catholics poured a lot of their resources into the development of their own education system.

4. Between the Wars: 1919 - 1939 - "Blight".

The war to end all wars was the seedbed of cynicism, as the political and economic problems of the twenties and thirties revealed the inability of politicians to build the better world for which millions had supposedly died. The imprint of the war on New Zealand psychology was considerable, with 1 in 17 dying as a result of the conflict. War memorials throughout the country still bear silent testimony to the scar left upon our society. Peace and abhorrence of war became an issue on which some church leaders found common cause. The United Peace Committee, with official representatives from the Anglican, Presbyterian, Roman Catholic, Methodist, Baptist and Congregational Chruches, the Salvation Army, the Church of Christ and the Society of Friends which came together in 1927 represented a unique ecumenical beginning with its statement: "that war as a means of settling disputes between nations is utterly opposed to the mind of Christ".[5]

The collapse of the League of Nations and the rise of Fascist governments and militarism undermined the peace initiatives of the Churches. But when war broke out in 1939 the churches avoided the jingoism of the first world war. Working together, they attempted to gain political recognition for the rights of conscientious objectors. Significant dissenting individuals, notably Ormond Burton, made sure that the Christian Pacifist point of view was heard. At the same time New Zealand probably had the worst record amongst Commonwealth countries in its treatment of conscientious minorities.[6]

Churches largely operated as self-sufficient islands. Their worship, ministry and organisations: Sunday Schools, Bible Classes, Women's Groups, were for the inhabitants of each particular island. Links had been formed between the islands for those issues where people could join in common cause: Bible in schools, prohibition, and moral campaigns. Attempts to link the Presbyterian, Methodist and Congregational islands 1902-1904, 1919-22, 1930-33 proved abortive but were indicative of the way in which traditional barriers were breaking down. The international climate contributed to this with the growth of the three arms of the ecumenical movement: the International Missionary Council, Faith and Order, Life and Work with their international conferences. (Edinburgh 1910, Stockholm 1925, Lausanne 1927, Jerusalem 1928, Edinburgh and Oxford 1937, Tambaram 1938) The Student Christian Movement brought inhabitants of the various islands together and their conferences throughout the twenties and thirties proved to be important seedbeds for future ecumenical leadership.

Attention was also being given to the interaction of Church and Society as the self-sufficiency of the churches came under pressure with the erosion of numbers, the failure of the prohibition campaign and growing economic disorder. Methodists more than any other Church sought to take their context seriously, adopting their "Social Creed" in 1922 with its concern about industry, work, wages, holidays, poverty and Christian involvement in the political life. The Depression forced all the churches to look beyond the important social service and relief work in which they engaged to the causes of economic distress. The Churches moved away from supporting the economic

Presbyterians and the Associated Churches of Christ came closer together drawing up a draft basis of union in 1962. This was shelved when Anglicans joined the Church union discussions in 1964 and an even greater union seemed possible. Vatican II (1963-1965) brought about a significant change in Roman Catholic life with important repercussions for ecumenical relationships. The barriers of religious division erected by previous generations quickly collapsed.

7. 1965 - 1985 Die-back and Pruning.

Since the late sixties, New Zealand society has experienced division and uncertainty in many areas of life. The growth of unemployment, the impact of inflation and the growing disparity between rich and poor illustrate the economic division which New Zealand has experienced. For the main-stream churches the growth and hopes of the post war period were not sustained and they have suffered from a continuing decline and an overall ageing in their membership. Religious and secular pluralismand the increasing marginality of the churches has meant that ecumenical solidarity and united Christian witness has been difficult to achieve let alone sustain.

The enthusiasm surrounding Billy Graham's visit in 1959 was replaced by coolness and controversy when he returned in 1969. Homegrown attempts at indigenous mission such as InterView '69 reflected a change in orientation but have had little lasting impact. The current interest in Church Growth strategies is just another indication of our dependence on imported models.

In the area of theology little creative writing has appeared. Even our theological controversies such as the Geering heresy trial and the recent debate over Jesus: The Evidence reflect imported debates in which the New Zealand content is minimal and exposes what Jim Veitch has described as our "theological shallowness". Some of the most creative thinking appears to be emerging from the theological reflection of women, Maoris and those involved in struggles to understand themselves within their own context against the background of the forces which have shaped churches and society.

The emergence of the charismatic movement and the growth in particular of the Pentecostal churches have resulted in a whole new redrawing of the church scene. The ecumenical movement no longer can act as an umbrella under which all Christians gather. We live in an age of polarisation in which the ecumenical movement has to face a new dynamic: well organised, right wing, conservative churches and Christians who adopt very different positions on political, moral and theological issues.

The divisiveness of recent times is illustrated in some of the issues with which New Zealanders have had to grapple: the Vietnam War and the observance of Anzac day; debates over abortion, homosexuality and drugs; apartheid, race relations, racism, rugby tours and the Treaty of Waitangi; the ordination of women, issues raised by the women's movement, the United Nations convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women, overseas aid, development issues, sponsorship; Pacific Island migration and overstayers; nuclear warships, nuclear testing and ANZUS.

Conclusion:

The last period has been titled as one of "die-back" when mainstream churches seemed to lose their way as: theological debate, and the rapid secularisation of New Zealand life, the collapse of the church union movement, the challenge of the pentecostal movement, moral, political and racial issues have contributed to division, declining numbers, and the resurgence of denominationalism. But in the process of pruning in which the churches have been involved, new life and vitality appeared. Churches have become more conscious of their context, that we live in a pluralistic, multi-cultural society in which economic, social, sexual and racial injustice are much more clearly obvious than we have been willing to recognise in the past. But the Springbok Tour '81 revealed the tensions which face the Church as it tries to find its way into the late eighties and nineties. The privatisation of religion competes with the politicisation of the gospel. Pastoral care and prophetic involvement in society have often been placed in separate compartments. National statements by church leaders and the position adopted by many in the pews have often been out of touch with one another.

The Churches came to New Zealand as transplants, and as bearers of tradition they are conservative bodies which have sought to preserve their own identity and at times enforce their vision of the world on the whole of society. The collapse of Prohibition and Sabbatarianism illustrate the failure of such campaigns and point to the growing marginality and minority status of the Church in New Zealand society. No one Church or group has ever achieved a majority status. Looking to the future Lloyd Geering has said "The prognosis for even the present mainline churches is not a bright one. They cannot survive, either singly or in union, as pretenders for the role of national church."[8]

I want to suggest that the future for the Church in its ecumenical witness lies in taking seriously the historical, social, political and economic context in which we find ourselves. Historically the churches are transplants still in the process of adapting to the New Zealand environment, having to come to terms with their marginality and minority status. The social context in which they are located is a secular, pluralistic, multi-cultural society in which there are many competing world views. Politically the churches reflect their constituency, tending towards conservatism, middle class, still dominated by male thinking and leadership in a society which is also still dominated by these features. Economically there is a growing disparity between rich and poor, in which minority groups are disproportionately represented at the bottom end of the economic pile. The threat of nuclear holocaust is the international backdrop against which the future of the whole world has to be seen.