EGLINTON ST. GEORGE'S
UNITED CHURCH

Everlasting Bonds of Tenderness
By Betsy Anderson, Coordinator of Lay Ministry

Members of Eglinton St. Georges contribute in many ways to our neighbourhood and community. The Centennial Infant and Child Centre at 1580 Yonge Street is an example of the vision and determination of folks from this congregation which brought a wonderful resource into existence. In the 1960s, there was no preschool in Toronto for children with multiple handicaps. Parents, who chose to keep their children at home instead of institutionalizing them, had no consistent relief from 24 hour care and almost no means of getting help to develop the skills and talents of these little children. Pat Littlejohn, a Kindergarten Specialist and mother of a disabled child developed a nursery school program along with others from St. George's United Church Women, Unit 12.

In 1965, Pat opened a school in her home for three lucky children and this formed the nucleus of what would become Centennial Infant and Child Centre. In 1967, as part of their "Centennial Project", the women of St. George's United Church offered space (and provided volunteers) in the church, and the school became Centennial Nursery School for Retarded Children. It was a non-profit organization licensed by the Day Nurseries Branch of the Ontario Department of Social and Family Services. This unique school provided individual programmes developed by specialists for children from two years to 16 years. Each child had an adult volunteer to implement the programme. When the Metropolitan Toronto School Board took over responsibility for school age children, Centennial dedicated itself to children two to four years old.

In 1980, realizing the importance of exposure to children who are typically developing, the staff began the "Reverse Integration" programme which now serves eight children. All children benefit from having peers of differing abilities. By watching and imitating children who are developing typically, the children with special needs are stimulated to learn. In addition to the usual skills learned at school all children learn tolerance of differences, patience, and acceptance.
With the increase in numbers of children and subsequent increase in staff, the facilities at St. George's United Church became too crowded. Fund raising was begun to relocate Centennial to its own building and in October 1997 the school moved to its present location.

Eglinton St. George's commitment to children and families with special needs, continues through a number of volunteers from the congregation who enable the one-to-one adult/child ratio. If you are interested in volunteering one morning a week from 9 a.m. to 11:45 a.m. contact Debby McLernon or Judy Campbell at 416-935-0200, ext. 221. Each volunteer is thoroughly trained by the staff and assigned to one child. The volunteer carries out the individualized program designed by the teachers for their child.

How good it is to celebrate the ministry of the laity of this congregation.
That from my depths new life emerges
thanks be to you, O God.
That through my body
and the bodies of men and women everywhere
heaven's creativity is born on earth,
children of eternity are conceived in time
and everlasting bonds of tenderness
are forged amidst the hardness of life's struggles,
thanks be to you.

J. Philip Newell