

Music for the terminally ill

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LIKE many musicians, Winnipegger **Steve Bell** gets fan mail. But over the years he noticed that one subject kept coming up again and again in the letters and e-mails: death.

"I kept reading about how my songs helped people cope with the end of life," says Bell, noting that many letters and e-mails came from people who were dying, or from their caregivers.

For a long time, he only regarded it as an interesting and touching aspect of his work as a Christian singer and songwriter. But then Ben McLean, a longtime friend and fan, wrote to say he was dying of cancer; he added that Bell's songs were a great comfort as he approached the end of his life. He went on to suggest that Bell create a special CD for people like him, who were dying.

"Ben wasn't the first person to suggest an album like that, but he was the first to spell it out in great detail," Bell says, adding that McLean included a list of songs that were helpful to him as he was dying. "He didn't say that 'God told me to tell you this,' but I instantly knew I had to act on his suggestion."

The result is *Solace For Seasons of Suffering*, a new collection of classic songs by Bell such as *Wings of an Eagle*, *Ever Present Need*, *For the Journey* and *Remember Me*, among others. The album is dedicated to McLean, who died last year. It will be released in September.

But before he went ahead with the project, Bell sought advice from people involved in hospice and palliative care about what songs to include on the CD. "I wanted their opinion on every level," he says.

He was especially concerned that, because he is a Christian songwriter, some might see the album as a "sneak attack" on vulnerable people.

"I'm a Christian, and I write from a Christian world view," he says. "But this is not an evangelistic album. These are process songs, not wrap-up songs. They raise questions, without trying to provide all the answers. They're written for people who don't know how things will turn out."

The main message of the album, he says, is the "unconditional love of God for all creation." Anyone, he adds, "can find spiritual solace in these songs."

Bell's album comes along at a time when using music to comfort and support the dying is becoming more common in hospice and palliative care programs across Canada. According to music therapist Jim Wiebe, music can be of great comfort during times of fear, grief, anxiety, sadness, and anger -- all feelings that can arise when someone is dying.

"Music can soothe us when we are troubled," says Wiebe, who teaches music therapy at Winnipeg's Canadian Mennonite University. "It's God's gift to us, and can put people in touch with God at a time when they are most tender, such as when they are dying. It is solace for the soul."

Wiebe saw the power of music first-hand in June, when his mother-in-law was dying. During her final days, she was often upset and agitated. "When we sang for her, it calmed her down," he says.

Dr. Margaret Cottle, a palliative care physician from Vancouver, advised Bell on the creation of the album. She says that his songs are particularly helpful because of his "contemplative" style and

because his lyrics "aren't simplistic. They acknowledge that there are some things on this side of heaven that we just won't understand."

For Bell, it's humbling to know that his music is helping people through difficult times like illness and dying. "When I wrote the songs, I never imagined that they would have this effect," he says. "I'm touched by this, and honoured that so many people have seen my songs in this light."

But along with providing comfort to people near the end of their lives, Bell hopes to also change the way we view death and dying. "We need to honour that season, just as we honour seasons like birth, adolescence, marriage and other times," he says. "I don't want to minimize the suffering that comes from losing a loved one, or viewing the end of your own life, but there is a beauty to that time of life, too."

Along with the CD of songs, the album contains a second CD of interviews with former Winnipeg theology professor John Stackhouse and local Anglican pastor Jamie Howison about topics such as death and whether God can be trusted. "It's about why bad things happen to people," Bell says.

In addition to making the album available for sale, Bell is soliciting donations so he can give away copies to pastors, chaplains, doctors and others who work with dying people.

"If it can be helpful to others, then I want to provide this service," he says, adding that "I hope these songs are helpful for the journey we all make to the one who created and sustains us."