

## Music program provides a place for freedom of expression

**What do you get when you** connect professional musicians with a crowd of enthusiastic people willing to sing, dance and play music?

It's not a riddle – it's the formula for a weekly joyous coming together of up to 200 people, from teenagers to the elderly, at the Christ Community Church on Holland Avenue in Victoria.

The Namaste music program evolved organically, starting seven years ago in the kitchen of a day program run by Terry Flatt. Flatt's neighbour of 14 years was a well-known international jazz guitarist, Mark Atkinson. Atkinson started to come over to play for the people attending Flatt's day program. The result was immediate chemistry, and the number of people wanting to come grew rapidly. This encouraged Scott White, bassist and co-founder with Atkinson of the "Bill Hilly Band," to work to expand the program to as many people as possible. Flatt approached the Church beside his house to ask if they could use their space. The Church said yes, and ever since there's been music played there on Friday mornings from 10:30am to 11:30am.

Since the program started playing at the Church, it's seen a who's who of Victoria's skilled, professional musicians. The rotating roster of musicians playing every week is managed by Calvin Cairns, a well-known Canadian fiddler. He has helped to draw musicians such as singer/songwriter Carolyn Mark, violinist and teacher Daniel Lapp, Chris Frye, lead singer and guitarist

for "The Bills," and Devon McCafferty, a guitarist and singer who is also the band's front man.

Those that give of their time "are great musicians and great humanists, who can see past the disabilities to the community," says Flatt. They also have to be able to play a very broad range of songs, from "Take Me Out to the Ballgame" to AC/DC's "Dirty Deeds Done Dirt Cheap," as the participants choose the playlist.

Flatt says the success of the program does not hinge on him or the musicians. It's the people who come each week. The philosophy of Namaste is to give the audience what they want, that's what makes it work. "People can be who they want to be, when they want to be," says Flatt. "It doesn't matter how they look or behave. It's a chance for freedom of expression in public, and to show their love of music and people."

Participants choose the songs they want to hear and sing. The stage is set-up with a drum kit, piano, microphones and amps. People can choose an

instrument they want to play. The stage becomes crowded with the musicians, the regulars and those who have gotten the nerve for the first time to stand in front of the crowd. Couples and singles dance in front of the stage. Reunions of friends take place throughout the audience. It's a raucous, entertaining, energetic and joyful coming together.

Everyone is welcome at Namaste and the weekly event has drawn as many as 250 participants at one session. For many, it's the highlight, a much anticipated event. What do people have to say about it? "It's the best kept secret in Victoria.," "I love coming to see my friends.," "I can sing, I can sing".

