

Article

Holden Village *Vespers* '23: (Re)Sounding a Transforming Community

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Abstract: Nestled in the remote Cascade mountains of Washington State, Holden Village operates as a year-round Lutheran retreat center with a robust musical and liturgical culture. While on sabbatical in the Village in 1986, composer Marty Haugen wrote his *Holden Evening Prayer* liturgy, a now-iconic setting beloved around the world. Known in the Village as *Vespers* '86, Haugen's liturgy soon became canonical. Over 35 years later, however, *Vespers* '86 is a fraught icon of collective identity. As Village leadership welcomes a greater diversity of people, Haugen's liturgical language, theological perspective, and musical style do not universally resonate. Yet others adore—and sometimes demand—Haugen's liturgy, regarding it as essential to the Village. Suggestions to adapt Haugen's liturgy have been met with a simple question, one posed by Haugen himself: Why not write a new one? This paper chronicles the collaborative process of liturgical composition at Holden that resulted in *Vespers* '23. Centering methodologies of participant-observation and ethnographic interview, I engage the Holden community as a liturgical musician and ethnomusicologist. The resulting paper shows how this unique cohort navigates identity, belonging, tradition, and change through the rich and contested sites of music and liturgy.

Keywords: liberal Protestantism; worship; liturgy; Holden Village



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1. Introduction

Set deep in Washington State's remote Cascade mountains, Holden Village is notoriously inaccessible. Reachable from the nearest paved road via 40 miles of hiking trail or, more commonly, a 2 h ferry ride over Lake Chelan and another hour by bus up 11 miles of steep switchbacks, it is remarkable that hundreds of visitors, staff, and faculty pass through the Village every year, spending a week, month, or even years in this unique Christian-rooted center. Built by James Henry Holden of the Howe Sound Mining Company in 1928 to house up to 600 miners and their families, the company donated the Village to the Lutheran Bible Institute of Seattle in 1957 after the mine's closure. Holden Village opened as a year-round Lutheran retreat center two years later. It is regarded as one of the most remote continuously occupied places in the United States (Trammell 2019).

In the summer months, the Village runs camp-style intergenerational programs for around 250 guests per week who come as individuals, extended families, church groups, trail maintenance crews, or through-hikers along the nearby Pacific Crest Trail. Guests may partake of programs like academic courses, children's camps, hiking, and arts alongside a dose of unplugged communal living in the resplendent wilderness. The bustling golden summers in Holden Village bear little resemblance to the winters. Visitors dwindle as heavy precipitation blankets the Village in several feet of monochromatic snowpack. The 50-member community that remains endures harsh conditions and intense community life, and only the intrepid remain.

Throughout the annual whiplash of busy summers and spare winters, one activity remains constant: the community, in whatever form it takes, gathers to sing and pray together every evening of the year. In spite of an inaccessible location and extreme conditions, staff, volunteers, and directors seek for Holden Village to be a space of radical welcome, marked by diversity and inclusion. These aspirations are included on the website homepage:

Holden Village welcomes and embraces people of all races, ethnicities, religious backgrounds, gender identities, sexual orientations, and abilities. Holden Village has been a Reconciling in Christ congregation since 1985.

For the sake of Justice, Holden is called to foster Diversity through deliberate invitation and welcome; deploy an ethic of Equity to confront and dismantle systemic oppression; and practice Inclusion by listening to, learning from, and being transformed by marginalized voices, in order to become, together, the community for which God longs.

Liturgy thus is a living and breathing artifact of community life, changing to reflect the priorities, perspectives, and needs of the Holden Village residents, and telegraphing its distinct identity as a Christian wilderness retreat center in the Progressive tradition.

2. Purpose, Thesis and Methodology

This paper focuses on two original Holden Village sung Vespers services, written over 35 years apart: Marty Haugen's 1986 *Holden Evening Prayer* and the brand-new 2023 *Bless This Night*, written collaboratively by Village staff members Mark Griffith, Rachel Joy, Steve Wolbrecht, and Heather Griffith. These particular texts represent a small sliver of the many different forms daily worship may take in a year, defined and transformed by rotating leaders, musicians, and faculty (Griffith 2023; Joy 2023; Joy et al. 2023; Wolbrecht 2023). Nevertheless, these two liturgies emerge as rich and contested sites where the community negotiates and reflects their collective identity, theology, and values through language, form, musical style, and participatory structures. Thus, this project offers a layered portrait of the community's centers and peripheries through the lens of liturgy.

This paper reflects my participant-observation methodology, writing as both a professional church musician in the Evangelical Lutheran Church in American (ELCA) and a Ph.D. ethnomusicologist. As a participant, I served as music faculty for two summer weeks in 2022 and 2023, directing ensembles and planning worship as a steward of the Village's closely held identity and values. My personal experience at Holden Village shaped my narrative, as did wide-ranging informal conversations with guests, volunteers, staff, and other faculty members. Like many before me, I love the people, place, and pace of Holden Village, feeling a reverberant sense of belonging in the midst of its rhythms of community. I am grateful to the Holden Village community, especially Executive Directors Stacy, Kathie, Mark, and the *Vespers* '23 writing team for their welcome and support, both as a friend of the Village and as a researcher, and for offering feedback and proofreading for initial drafts of this paper.

As an ethnomusicologist and scholar, I also bring an ethnographic and scholarly lens informed by ritual and music studies. I conducted formal interviews with liturgical composers, executive directors, music faculty, and staff members with a variety of investments and experiences at Holden Village. I also interrogate my own felt "belonging" at Holden Village as a middle-class white Christian woman on the theological far left. With this perspective, a more complicated view of Holden's liturgies arises. Asking, "who is this liturgy for?" tacit boundaries emerge that reveal centers and peripheries, expanding belonging for some while constricting it for others. This paper thus contributes to existing scholarship by showing the iterative process by which communities shape, and are shaped by, practices of liturgy and music.

Musicologist Mark Porter's concept of resonance provides a useful framework for this project, expanding an analysis of sound from the "physical, vibrational, and sonic realm" into "personal, social, and spiritual realities as they exist within or alongside the soundings of musical activity" (Porter 2020, p. 7). Defining resonance through an assemblage of interdisciplinary employments of the term (particularly Rosa, James, Nancy, Erlmann, and Gerston), resonance is at once the physicality of sound in space, as well as the subjective, relational, and spiritual connotations that sound variously, and often inconsistently, signifies. Resonance helps us to interrogate questions like how sound interacts with affect or feeling—perhaps opening a person to experiencing intimacy with God or other people—or

how musicking might mediate between intellectual ideals and embodiment, feeling theological concepts like grace or Trinitarian unity, and so on. Raising questions rather than articulating a unified theory of resonance, Porter observes the complex ways that devotional musicking interacts with, represents, and produces relationships, spatialities, temporalities, power, energetic intensity, and the experience of the Holy, pushing and pulling toward different salient aspects depending on circumstance.

I find Porter's open-handed, multiplex approach to resonance exciting in its vastness, and this paper adds to his diverse case studies an interrogation of the role of the composer in writing repertoires that may variously resonate with a community's perceived identity and theological values, features of surrounding landscape and ecology, salient histories (and challenges to those histories), and desired emotions via musical sound, transforming resonance into an instrumentalization of discernment and dialogue. I concede that seeking to write resonant repertoires is an enormous creative challenge. Signification, like the slippery affect of resonance, is always enmeshed in multivalence and interpreted in multiple ways by different individuals and constituencies. Thus, Holden Village's repertoires represent an "ecology of resonance: a set of entities, interactions, and spaces that comes together according to particular patterns, coincidences, and logics so as, together, to constitute a particular act of musical devotion" (ibid, 25), one perceived as highly resonant by some and less so by others.

3. The Holden Village Context: Liberal, Strict, and Transient

Porter's richly interdisciplinary definition of resonance encourages an analysis of intersecting and overlaid vantage points. To understand how liturgy and music resonate and reverberate through Holden Village, one must understand its context, inclusive of community identity, shared commitments, and internal tensions and contestations.

Set in the Pacific Northwest "none zone" where a larger share of the population reports "no religious affiliation" as compared to the rest of the country, Holden Village's culture uniquely intersects Seattle's progressive and pluralistic social values and a distinctive Christian identity (Killen and Shipley 2004). Holden Village is thus closely aligned with James K. Wellman Jr.'s definition of liberal Protestant congregations in the Pacific Northwest who "most often propose that Jesus is a model of radical inclusiveness—fashioning an ethic that emphasizes hospitality to those marginalized in society" (Wellman 2008, p. 5). With a moral worldview predicated on "inclusion, hospitality, justice, and social outreach" (Wellman 2008, p. 105), liberal Christian groups tend to resist central authority (Wellman 2008, p. 114), leading paradoxically to a decentralized moral framework, leaving it to the individual to determine right from wrong and good from evil (Wellman 2008, p. 5). Furthermore, unlike their Evangelical counterparts, whose worldviews center order and "absolute" truth, liberal Protestants welcome liminality, uncertainty, and challenges to their beliefs (Wellman 2008, p. 69). From a liturgical standpoint, artifacts of tradition must also change in response to critiques, becoming reflective of learning and refining in order to cohere with broader moral commitments.

Holden Village has long represented the left ideological flank of its liberal Protestant umbrella denomination, the Evangelical Lutheran Church in America (ELCA), centering on full participation by women and the ELCA's Reconciling in Christ (RIC) movement, which affirms LGBTQIA2S+ people by means of full inclusion in the life of the church. Holden Village joined the RIC movement in 1985, over two decades before the denomination affirmed ordination for gay and lesbian pastors in committed partnerships in 2009. Writing in 1987, Charles Lutz described Holden Village as "functioning as a virtual laboratory for liturgical reform", and, particularly, "struggling with the problem of gender in liturgical language long before that concern became a conventional matter in the English-speaking world" (Lutz 1987, p. 125). But, in spite of the denomination's welcoming and inclusive aspirations, it is also overwhelmingly homogeneous by race: The ELCA is the whitest Christian group, at 96%, which is also reflected in Holden's core demographic (Lipka 2015).

Beginning a five-year term as co-directors in 2020, Stacy Kitahata, Mark Bach, and Kathie Caemmerer-Bach have conscientiously prioritized diversifying Holden Village's constituency by race, gender identity, sexual orientation, and religious affiliation (Kitahata 2023). Kitahata, a third-generation Japanese-American Lutheran who initially came to Holden Village as a diversity consultant, brings decades of experience in forging spaces of belonging for people of color within ELCA and other Christian-rooted organizations. The Bachs, both of whom are white, and have long family ties to Holden Village and Lutheranism, lived and worked abroad in India, Taiwan, and Japan. Because Holden Village's remoteness further renders it inaccessible to many, including those with medical needs or physical disabilities, as well as those without resources of time or money to travel—barriers that particularly exclude historically marginalized groups—the executive team intentionally sought to redress these barriers through invitations and scholarships. Summer 2021's faculty was the most racially diverse and intersectional in Holden's history, also including many LGBTQIA2S+ people and those from a variety of Christian and interfaith traditions, as well as a growing cohort of non-Christians.

Recruitment of a diverse faculty also extends to music leaders. Kitahata and her partner Diakonda Gurning assisted with the formation of the Glocal (a portmanteau of *local* and *global*) musician cohort through the national ELCA denomination, which actively resisted the ELCA's overwhelming whiteness by bringing together diverse Lutheran musicians from around the world to share musical resources and culturally sensitive teaching models, forming a community I wrote about briefly in a 2020 paper (Marchesini 2021). This critical cohort space offered an annual gathering for hundreds of musicians of color in the global church. Though the program was discontinued in 2019, Glocal leaders have served as Holden Village faculty musicians for several weeks each summer, and thus musicians like Omar Mixco from Mexico and Kristina Diaz from Puerto Rico have brought diverse sounds and musical structures to Holden alongside a formal teaching model that centers on stories and context. Further, the Village reserves several weeks for Spanish-speaking cohorts during the summer, centering Latinx leadership and participants. In spite of these efforts, Holden Village is still not always considered a safe or comfortable space by many people of color, and its palpable, overwhelming whiteness continues.

With a demonstrated commitment to inclusiveness, Holden Village coheres with characteristics of liberal Christianity—"relativism, dialogue, and diversity"—postures that welcome plurality, defined by sociologist Dean Kelley as *lenient*, opposed to *strictness*, which is defined as "absolutism, conformity, and fanaticism" (Kelley 1972, pp. 15–16). Viewing religiosity as a market commodity, economist Iannaccone follows Kelley's hypothesis in affirming that strictness promotes organizational strength and growth. *Strictness*, or "the degree to which a group limits and thereby increases the *cost* of nongroup activities" (Iannaccone 1994, p. 1182), raises the demands of participation for in-group members, thereby reducing "free-riders" who contribute little to the organization.

I would argue that Holden Village offers a unique case of a *strict* liberal Protestant religious community, one stratified by tenure and role in the Village. Though the liberal Protestant values apparent at Holden Village cohere with a *lenient* religious worldview, the difficulties of travel and communal wilderness living layer a *strict* dimension upon participation, demanding sacrifice and full immersion by a largely volunteer staff. Whether a week-long summer guest or long-term volunteer staff, any experience at Holden requires a large buy-in. Even though the majority of summer guests pay to attend, exchanging money for exemption from labor, they still must invest time, travel, and tuition to enter a Village with no access to internet or phone service (faculty and staff may access WiFi, but use of personal devices in community space borders on taboo). Maintaining the small but vibrant civilization at Holden Village requires everybody's participation in each facet of Village life: pastors serve as paramedics and bus drivers, industrial kitchen staff lead music for worship, and music professionals sort and process community garbage. This produces a distinct lifestyle in the Village, a kind of liberal Protestant eco-commune.

Per Iannaccone's definition, the *strength* of Holden Village is amplified through a radical experience of social proximity: with stretches of unstructured time unimpeded by technology's incessant interruptions, a relatively small amount of physical space, and many communal activities like meals and worship, time in Village produces potent "mountain top" experiences, both social and individual, with connections made over lingering conversation, surprising close encounters with wildlife, hilarity during campfire singalongs, and emotional worship experiences. The environment closely mimics the connectional social spaces described by scholar Sheila Liming in her book, *Hanging Out: The Radical Power of Killing Time* (Liming 2022). Guests and staff in the Village will also often return again, some every successive year, and some after many years away, with these memorable moments in mind, desiring or expecting the present to mirror the past in a fond nostalgia.

However, no longitudinal "center" coheres within the Holden Village community, where transience and turnover is the norm. Summer guests arrive and depart in weekly cohorts; through-hikers on the nearby Pacific Crest Trail drop in to stay for a day or several; volunteers may offer a few weeks or a year depending on their availability, and a few stay continuously for several years. Even Executive Directors rotate on five-year terms. Nobody stays in the Village for decades. Unlike many high-demand religious groups, this transience is expected and encouraged. As Marty Haugen put it, "Holden is a river"; paraphrasing Heraclitus—the Village community, from season to season, is never the same. In this way, the transient nature of the Village grates against competing nostalgias, as people bring a sentimental "longing for the past" of Holden Village, but with relatively little shared social memory (Sedikides and Wildschut 2022, p. 45).

Thus, the social, and therefore liturgical, center of the community returns again to those who sacrifice most for its maintenance: long-term staff and volunteers. The labor and participation of long-term Village staff is quite demanding, especially in winter, when conditions turn harsh, and visitors dwindle. The 50-member community that remains in winter is comprised mostly of volunteer staff, traversing the snow fields of the Village on foot-stomped paths, children strictly supervised, routes set at safe distance away from buildings where snow or ice may perilously plunge off steep roofs. Close to the northern border of the United States, the already-brief hours of midwinter daylight are reduced by the sprawling shadows of mountains surrounding the village, the sun rising only in the short gap between Buckskin and Copper peaks that tower over Holden Village. Power from the hydroelectric dam slows to a drip; even in 2023, low supply meant careful conservation, with strictly scheduled alternations between heating implements to warm buildings and cook food, cold showers, and frigid chalets heated only by living room fireplaces.

Concordant with *strictness* theory, the demanding conditions of off-season community life result in strong bonds for those who live in the Village for longer tenures. This results in relatively stratified groups, made so by participation in mandatory processes of labor and maintenance: low-demand guests, medium-demand short-term volunteers, and high-demand long-term volunteers and staff.

4. Consistent Liturgical Commitments at Holden Village

With a shared commitment to creativity and flexibility in liturgical space, worship and "Sacred Space" reflects and refracts the Holden Village community, ranging from explicit commitments to inclusion and diversity, to implicit centers and peripheries in sacrifice and labor (*strictness*), and the impacts of transience and nostalgia. This impacts perceived ownership over collective narratives, artifacts, and processes—the heart of liturgy—as those who have sacrificed more to sustain the Village feel a strong claim to the words and sounds that pattern its rhythm. Notably, while the liturgies in question seek to reflect expanding liturgical commitments to diversity and inclusion, they both ultimately were written *by* and *for* the highest-demand group in the Village, its long-term volunteers and staff.

Other shared commitments arose in conversations with Marty Haugen and the *Vespers* '23 writing team. All evinced a critical engagement with worship (today called Sacred Space), underscoring a belief that community ritual has *formational* potential: in other words,

what people *do together* informs their identities and relationships, patterning collective life and systems. This ideology of worship resonates with activist and writer Adrienne Maree Brown's imaginative vision for collaborative and multivocal movement which organizes and telegraphs spheres of individual and collective formation. In her 2017 book, *Emergent Strategy*, she offers that movements operate in a manner analogous to fractals, "infinitely complex patterns that are self-similar across different scales" (Brown 2017, p. 51). According to Brown, "what we practice at the small scale sets the patterns for the whole system" (Brown 2017, p. 53).

Brown tacitly instrumentalizes the theories of ritual offered by sociologists like Catherine Bell (1992) and Ronald Grimes (2002), who recognize that minutiae like objects, texts, and styles of dress imply hierarchies which, through repetition, reinscribe relationships of power. Through this lens, the seemingly insignificant practice of community ritual serves as a practice of interconnection and relationship that, with time and repetition, may "scale up", impacting social structures and politics.

Another shared liturgical commitment between Haugen and the *Vespers '23* writing team surrounds radically localized rituals written for, and in dialogue with, a particular community. Seeking to reflect shared values and incorporating feedback in an interactive process, both liturgies exemplify *community exegesis*, defined by Leonora Tubbs Tisdale as a dialogic hermeneutic of solidarity, responsive to the discourses, ethos, and values that animate the people (Tisdale 1997). In each case, composers wrote for a particular *place* and *people*, composing and collaborating in an interactive process to ensure the resulting representative liturgy. Holden Village composers emphasize liturgical change, reflective of liberal Protestant values, as a site to practice an emergent ideal world.

Returning to Porter, the process of composing a liturgical soundscape that is perceived as *resonant* within the Holden Village community requires attunement to a vast and intersecting series of considerations. Composers must engage with the commitments, values, aspirations, and accountabilities expressed by the community, as well as the disagreements and conflicts that complicate cohesion. Further, woven into musical sound and theology are the demanding conditions of community living, harsh weather, geographical remoteness, and the towering peaks that rise in all directions, ecological realities that affect all who visit the Village, but particularly strain those who stay for the winter. Lastly, liturgical writing interpolates received traditions and transformations through text and style and sound. Liturgies thus *resonate* with relationships, both seen and unseen, folding back into a Village always in transition, and sounding forward into the future.

5. Holden Village in 1986: "We Needed a New Service"

In the winter of 1986, Lutheran musician Marty Haugen, along with his wife Linda and their two elementary-school-age children, served on staff at this remote retreat center, enduring the isolating, dark season alongside a cohort of adventurous Christian pastors, missionaries, artists, theologians, and laity. Nightly, the intergenerational Christian community convened for worship ("because there is nothing else to do" in the winter, according to Haugen), with leadership rotating by volunteer sign-up, a practice that provoked passionate dialogue in the Village, as committed Lutherans rigorously evaluated liturgy and its impacts on the wider world (Haugen interview).

One winter day, by Haugen's telling, the volunteer leader passed out a paper bag to every person as they entered the worship space. Instructing the congregation to open their green *Lutheran Book of Worship* (LBW) to the Vespers service, the leader invited everyone to place the paper bag on their head whenever something in the liturgy offended them.

As the cantor intoned the opening phrase, Haugen recalled, "someone put the paper bag on their head and left it there for the entire service". Many others joined at intervals, registering revulsion toward various lines and passages. Haugen continued: "that's why we came to know we needed a new Vespers" (Haugen 2023). Through collaborative workshops, feedback, and critique with that 1986 winter community, Haugen wrote new words and music for an evening service dedicated "to the people of the Winter Community

at Holden, 1985–1986” (Haugen 1990, p. 5). Though at Holden, the folk-style liturgy is colloquially *Vespers '86*, the widely beloved service initially published in 1990 by GIA, distributed globally, and translated into many other languages, including Norwegian, Swedish, and Mandarin, is called simply *Holden Evening Prayer*.

Holden Evening Prayer adapts the LBW’s *Service of Light*, paraphrasing language and writing new music. Both services feature the following form: opening, “Joyous Light” congregational hymn, thanksgiving, Psalm 141, the Magnificat (Luke 1:46–55), prayers, and benediction. However, Haugen made significant changes. Adapting hierarchical and gendered language for God throughout the liturgy, Haugen reflected liberal theological commitments central for Holden Village residents. Haugen also added meter and rhyme schemes to many movements, adapting unmetred chants into poetic verse. See, for example, a comparison between the language in the “Joyous Light” hymn:

LBW (1978, p. 143)

Joyous light of glory: of the immortal Father;
Heavenly, holy, blessed Jesus Christ.
We have come to the setting of the sun, and we look to the evening light.
We sing to God, the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit:
You are worthy of being praised with pure voices forever.
O Son of God, O giver of life: The universe proclaims your glory.

Holden Evening Prayer (Haugen 1990, pp. 6–7)

Joyous light of heavenly glory, loving glow of God’s own face,
You who sing creation’s story, shine on every land and race.
Now as evening falls around us, we shall raise our songs to you,
God of daybreak, God of shadows, come and light our hearts anew.

Removing gendered language like “Father” and “Son”, as well as fawning adulations like “You are worthy of being praised”, the resulting verses instead emphasize God’s universality, love, and presence, which is consistent with a liberal Protestant worldview.

Furthermore, while both services return often to the contrast between darkness and light, Haugen expands this metaphor into a central motif. With few exceptions (as “God of daybreak, God of shadows” in the passage above), here Haugen’s service leaves intact one reiterated strict hierarchy: light prevails over dark, a metaphor for Christ who came as *light* into a *dark* world. This metaphor felt apt in a winter defined by peril and literal darkness.

Reflecting a commitment to centering women’s voices, Haugen chose to highlight the Magnificat, the prophetic song of praise Jesus’ mother Mary sings while pregnant, as one of the longest congregational songs in the liturgy. Haugen’s version adapts the LBW text, shifting Mary’s song into the grammatical second person, speaking not *about* God but *to* God. In so doing, the text is personalized, pronouns shifting from *he/him* to *you*, thus removing gendered and hierarchical language used for God. Again, the poetic re-interpretation follows a regular meter and rhyme scheme:

LBW (1978, p. 147)

My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord;
My spirit rejoices in God my Savior,
For he has looked with favor on his lowly servant.
From this day all generations will call me blessed.

Holden Evening Prayer (Haugen 1990, p. 18)

My soul proclaims your greatness, O God,
And my Spirit rejoices in you,
You have looked with love on your servant here,
And blessed me all my life through.

After workshopping the Magnificat with the Holden winter community, Haugen heeded two suggestions that further centered women. In the Magnificat, which names the patriarch Abraham, Haugen added Abraham’s spouse Sarah, placing her first in the pair. Furthermore, Holden residents observed that although Mary’s song is included in

the LBW *Service of Light*, nowhere is it credited to Mary. Haugen therefore wrote a preface to the Magnificat not found in the LBW—the Annunciation, in which the angel appears to Mary, announcing that she will bear God’s son. The Annunciation makes clear that the Magnificat is in Mary’s voice, even placing her words in quotes as it concludes, proceeding without a musical break into the Magnificat.

Musically, *Holden Evening Prayer* incorporates elements of Lutheran tradition and novel folk music forms, blending into a unique intertextual work. The work opens with Gregorian-chant-derived Psalm tone recitation, similar to the LBW setting and common in many Lutheran and Catholic churches. In Psalm tone recitation, singers chant a text on a single note until the final syllables of each phrase, which are sung on moving pitches. Psalm tone singing returns later, in the Evening Thanksgiving, giving way to a short unmetred chant which ends in a metrical, but still chant-like modal melody.

However, Haugen transforms several movements into metrical, rhyming folk hymns, most notably the Evening Hymn, Psalm 141, Annunciation, and Magnificat. Musically, these metered movements bear several features in common with British Isles folk songs that have been adapted into popular Christian hymn tunes and folded into the broad canon of white American hymnody through singing schools, folk revivals, and hymnal updates. Tunes like Slane (“Be Thou My Vision”), New Britain (“Amazing Grace”), The Ash Grove (“Let All Things Now Living”), and O Waly Waly (“The Water is Wide”)—in spite of diversity in their origin, era, tempo, and meter—share a variety of key features. These include metrical 8-bar phrases; diatonic chord progressions with strong tonic-dominant relationships; authentic cadences indicating finality and transition; strophic or verse-chorus forms; and melodies that move in close intervals (steps or thirds), with occasional leaps that add melodic interest. By adapting the chants into folk-song-like melodies, Haugen transformed them into easily singable, memorable musical compositions in a familiar “Americana” style.

Alternating between complex unmetred chants and melodic, metrical folk tunes, Haugen thoughtfully stratifies the musical material, assigning difficult musical passages to the solo cantor and easier songs to the congregation. Concordant with musicologist Thomas Turino’s dimensions of participatory performance, *Vespers ’86* offers “people with a wide range of abilities” musical roles that encourage their full participation (Turino 2008, p. 31). Other movements expand participatory structures: Psalm 141 is written as a verse-and-chorus round, adding repetition and mimicry. The Prayers introduce a congregational ostinato, repeating the same short series of notes while the cantor sings petitions over the congregation, joining them on the refrain, “God of mercy, hold us in love”.

As a last notable feature, Haugen scattered a few “Easter eggs”, insider nods to Holden Village residents, throughout the liturgy. For example, Haugen reflected an upcoming 1986 summer theme “Gentle Justice” in the third verse of the Evening Hymn. These playful textual elements further serve to highlight Haugen’s key purpose: writing a liturgy for and with an intimate community.

Though the liturgy’s contrasting styles and genres, nods to tradition and change, updated and poeticized language, and thoughtful participatory elements certainly capture some of the specialness of *Holden Evening Prayer*, there still exists an ineffable quality that endears this liturgy to many people. Marty Haugen has his vocal critics, most of whom object to his modern folk style and use of inclusive language. But I have never encountered another Lutheran liturgy that inspires the kind of adoration I see for *Holden Evening Prayer*. I had to ask Haugen to opine: What makes this liturgy so resonant, so dearly beloved? He responded, “Most of [my music] that’s survived was written with a particular community in mind and with feedback from that community. I was writing for only 50 people, but that gave it a life that was much larger”. He reflected, “I’m surprised that it’s survived as long as it has”, but said that it owed its longevity to a community “passionate about language” who cared enough to stay for hours after Vespers to discuss and refine the service together (Haugen 2023).

6. Holden Village in 2022: A Diversifying Community

In 2022 and 2023, I, too, traveled by car, boat, and bus from my home in Montana to Holden Village. During both weeks, the liberal Christian politics of the Village were immediately apparent. Sessions opened with a land acknowledgement, making clear that this former mining village sat on land expropriated from Native Americans, and noting partnerships with nearby tribes. Through introductions, each person included their names and pronouns, evincing a commitment to gender diversity and inclusion that created space for queer, transgender, and nonbinary people, several of whom served on staff. I served alongside a diverse faculty that included both committed Lutherans and atheists; two theologians, an ELCA program director, and one pastor; two people of color; and several queer and transgender people. Though palpably rooted in Lutheran theology and tradition, many in the Village did not find resonance in Christianity, either leaving the religions of their upbringing or having never attended church. In these ways, I encountered a Village community seeking to embody *welcome*, and centering expansive, pluralistic liberal Protestant values.

Like in 1986, Holden Village continues to be a community that convenes for daily worship—now called Sacred Space—in the spirit of passionate criticism and creative impulse. However, in 2022 I encountered a community wrestling not with the LBW but with Haugen's since-canonized *Holden Evening Prayer*, proverbially covering their heads with paper bags in response to core language and imagery.

In part, staff had just grown tired of *Vespers '86*. In spite of being only one of many original services written in the Village by composers like Tasche Jordan, Kent Gustavson, and Ray McKeever, over time, Haugen's liturgy came to occupy an uncomfortable space as the only musical canon attached to the Village. Furthermore, many Lutheran churches across the United States have adopted *Holden Evening Prayer* as a mid-week tradition during Advent and Lent. As an artifact of Holden nostalgia and Lutheran familiarity, it is often anticipated—and sometimes outrightly demanded—by summer guests, many of whom want to know: “when are we singing *Vespers '86*”? By the summer of 2022, the Village's worship staff had intentionally sidelined the Haugen liturgy, moving it out of the standard mid-week rotation into a siloed occasional offering, sometimes when the majority of the guests had gone home.

Furthermore, the Village's liturgical needs shifted. In informal conversations with Holden Village's residents, I learned that 2020's COVID-19 pandemic led to massive program disruptions and, later, labor shortages, leaving the Village understaffed and without a pastor. Daily liturgies were adapted for several years to accommodate the needs of a Holden Village community in crisis. After Steve Wolbrecht left as staff musician in August of 2022, the Village also did not consistently have a pianist. To accommodate all this upheaval, Villagers shifted to short, less-frequent outdoor worship services, *a cappella* unison singing or hodge-podge ensembles with random instruments, lending the freedom to try new things and upend structures. Living liturgy was adapted to fill the void, and Haugen's *Vespers* did not easily fulfill those needs.

But the primary issue with Haugen's service involved the racial undertones in his key metaphor of darkness and light adapted from the traditional *Vespers* language. Introduced to the Village through faculty like black womanist theologian Chasity Jones Selenga and echoing critiques from scholars like Craig Koslofsky, Amos Yong, and others, many at Holden Village understood that this metaphor had a history of weaponization by European Christian imperialists who overlaid their hierarchy of light prevailing over dark onto skin color. As European colonizers encountered dark-skinned people in the Americas, Africa, and Asia, they associated phenotypical darkness with irrationality and savagery, “evidence of non-European inferiority and unreason”, and contrasted this with their own perceived civility, enlightenment, and rationality (Stowlow and Meyer 2021, p. 120). This provided justification for subjugation and violence, including genocide, enslavement, land expropriation, and family separation, acts sanctified by Christian leaders and doctrine.

The resident pastors and worship teams first sought to reconcile this tension by adapting the darkness and light language in *Vespers '86*. Co-director Stacy Kitahata brought these changes to Haugen in an August 2021 email, explaining, “our adjustments grew from wrestling with the unfortunate and historic dark/light, evil/good binary. This was a topic of considerable exploration during our winter community and powerfully addressed this week by our bible study leader Chasity Jones Selenga. [We were compelled to make these changes because of the] implications and impacts on Black people and especially Black women”.

Continuing, Kitahata outlined a variety of proposed changes, including the following changes that the week’s visiting pastor Liv Larson Andrews had implemented during Sacred Space (adapted words in bold):

Holden Evening Prayer

Jesus Christ, you are the **light** of the world.
The **light** no **darkness** can overcome.
Stay with us now for it is evening
And the day is almost over.
Let your **light scatter the darkness**,
And shine within your people here.

Proposed change

Jesus Christ, you are the **life** of the world.
The **life** no **trial** can overcome.
Stay with us for it is evening
And the day is almost over.
Let your **joy brighten our sorrows**,
and shine within your people here

The Magnificat included another proposed change, substituting for “Sarah and Abraham” with “Hagar and Ishmael”. This adaptation thus centered two figures oppressed and marginalized in the Christian tradition, but uplifted in Islam: Hagar, an Egyptian slave given to Abraham by Sarah, bore Ishmael, considered the true firstborn of Abraham by Muslims and the patriarch of Islam.

Though Haugen responded graciously to these critiques, he reiterated the collective ownership of the 1986 winter community, responding: “When I wrote *Vespers '86*”, the community said ‘You wrote this while you were our village musician. We own this, and we want to publish this as ours’”. He did not consent to publishing or using the liturgy with these substantial structural changes. These conversations yielded a realization in the Village, much like Haugen’s so many years earlier: it was time again for something new.

7. Introducing *Vespers '23: Bless This Night*

Thus, the idea to write a new liturgy, *Vespers '23*, began to percolate. I first learned about intentions to write a new Vespers service from Pastor Mark Griffith in summer 2022. At the time, he shared with me a novel and ambitious collaborative intention, one bringing together diverse musicians with experience in the Village to contribute to a new multivocal liturgy. Particularly since critiques located around racial violence and exclusion propelled the energy for a new liturgy, this process seemed in line with the direction and mission of Holden Village toward strategic diversification. Several years of diverse faculty and guests offered many potential collaborators as composers, musicians, poets, and advisors, and an opportunity to deepen relationships with contributors with looser ties to the Village.

Any collaborative writing team would have served as a departure from previous liturgies written at Holden Village, all of which only listed a single marquee composer—nearly all of whom were white men. Mark and musician Steve Wolbrecht (both white men, as well) began to meet and decided to begin by creating the first piece of the liturgy with other long-term Villagers before expanding to other collaborators. Rachel Joy (she/they), lead accountant and a poet, joined the team, and together they began to rewrite the Magnificat.

Each assumed a distinct role: Mark, a theologian with a background in Biblical languages, endeavored a new translation of the Biblical text; Rachel poeticized the language; Steve, a tech professional and Holden Village information technology associate with a part-time role as village musician, composed the music. Soon, Mark's wife, Heather, a lawyer who continued her job while living in the Village, joined the trio as an editor, refining clarity and accessibility.

Though the team represented diversity in terms of gender identity, sexual orientation, Christian tradition, and ability, they also were aware of their racial homogeneity: all were white. However, as their creative partnership cohered, the initial objective of inviting racially diverse collaborators shifted. All four co-writers lived in the Village, and thus the centripetal force of intense community life and the shared symbols therein prevailed over the diffuse weaker ties of potential collaborators who only came for a summer week or two. Additionally, co-writing as a consistent team led to a unified artistic style in the service. Still, a desire to expand the circle to diverse voices persisted, transforming into an intention to ask for feedback from people in other traditions once the work was complete (to my knowledge, at present this has not happened).

Dialogic collaboration shifted instead to workshops with the residential Holden Village off-season community in a process closely resembling Haugen's. At intervals, the writers brought each completed piece to the small, close-knit Holden Village community, workshopping language and melodic elements. Continuing this process with Mark's translation, Rachel's poeticization, Steve's musical composition, Heather's editing, and a community feedback process with Villagers, the team wrote eight movements for *Vespers '23: Bless This Night*. The full service debuted in the Village on 22 May 2023.

With the resulting liturgy, the co-authors sought to be deeply responsive to the expressed theological commitments of the residential community, primarily in the liturgy's use of language and poetry. Staying true to the intention of disrupting the darkness–light binary in Haugen's liturgy, *Bless This Night* reiterates the goodness of darkness, welcoming its blessings. For instance, the opening litany ends with "prepare us to receive night's blessings", proceeding to this first verse of the Evening Hymn:

As the evening wind arises, darkness deepens vaulted skies.
Mountain shadows fill the valley, still and quiet, dusk arrives.
In the goodness of the dark for the nighttime we prepare.
Some claim rest for weary bodies; others start the watch in care.
We gather together to bless this night!

The theme of uplifting darkness continues in the Psalm text. *Vespers '23* replaces the traditional Psalm 141 (found in both Haugen and the prior LBW) with Psalm 121, which begins with the line, "I lift my eyes to the hills", adapted to the contextually appropriate "when I see the mountains". However, drawing inspiration from the chiasmic structure of the hymn, which places a traditional emphasis on the middle part of the Psalm text, the twice-repeated refrain calls God "sweet shadow at my side", portraying God as an image of the darkness, "sheltering me from harm, my steady shade from sun and moon" (the pronouns change from *me/my* to *our* in the second refrain).

Aside from shifting the key darkness–light metaphor, the writing team also reflected a few other community critiques and concerns in the resulting liturgy. The Annunciation reframes the angel's proclamation, phrased "You shall bear a child" in the Haugen, as a question, specifically, "Will you bear the savior Jesus?", thus allowing Mary to consent to her pregnancy. Further, as Mark described in a lecture–discussion, the team sought to incorporate Hagar without changing the words of Mary, "a young brown woman". A brief, implicit reference includes Hagar's name for God, "the One who sees me", in Genesis 16:13. The third verse of the Evening Hymn begins, "Praise to God, the one who sees me".

Musically, *Vespers '23* retains or slightly adapts many features of the Haugen. The Opening Litany mimics *Vespers '86* with a Psalm tone-style chant; however, the chant style does not return again, and spoken text is substituted. Melody-driven hymns draw features from British Isles/Americana folk-hymn styles with diatonic chord progressions,

strong tonic-dominant relationships, melodies that move largely in steps or thirds, strophic or verse-chorus forms, and regular meters. It thus replicates the homogeneity of white musical forms evident in the Haugen, echoing Appalachian Americana music derived of European folk styles.

Scholars and music writers [Johnson \(2013\)](#), [Reighley \(2010\)](#), and [Ching and Fox \(2008\)](#) note how American musicians, filmmakers, and writers have long utilized Appalachia as an imagined site of white rural “authenticity”. Discussing the rise of indie folk and alt-country in the 2010s, the authors variously argue that Appalachian musical styles conjure a simulacrum of escape from modern alienation and technological dominance to the “purity” of premodern agrarian life. This interpretation has salience at Holden Village, where Appalachian-derived acoustic folk musical styles are common across many liturgies, and seem to index a rural purity. Of course, romanticizing pre-modern Appalachia invisibilizes the enslavement and expropriation of non-white Americans in the same era and region; thus, this nostalgia only belongs to those whom it theoretically liberates. With this in mind, the *Vespers* ’23 liturgy may *speak* a language that incorporates the critiques and perspectives of people of color—even while abstracted and detached from the continued input of those very people. But it does not musically *perform* styles consistent with non-white liturgies, hymns, or spiritual songs, leaning instead upon repertoires that conjure white nostalgic rurality.

Further, the congregational music in *Vespers* ’23 is comparatively more difficult than that of *Vespers* ’86. Melodies feature many more leaps of a fourth or larger as, for instance, the “hook” in Evening Hymn, which features intervals of an ascending sixth and descending fifth within one bar of music. Several pieces, including the Annunciation and the closing Jesus Prayer, are through-composed, with limited musical repetition. Phrase lengths also vary and are sometimes irregular, like the Evening Hymn verse with two nine-bar phrases (divided 4 and 5) followed by a 4-bar refrain-like tag; occasional meter changes also occur. The Annunciation, a solo in *Vespers* ’86, but congregational in ’23, features a key change from D major to E major (softened by a repeat of the opening melody in the new key), then modulates back to D major for the Magnificat. Adding to the musical difficulty, the liturgy features fewer participatory structures as well, removing the round form and the meditative repetitions of the Prayers (though the prayers do feature a repeated refrain, it occurs five times compared with Haugen’s twelve).

Though the music is still very accessible and tuneful, rendering the liturgy successfully, it requires one to read both text and music at a fairly advanced level, particularly when first encountering it. While this is certainly also true of most of the Haugen, several movements of *Vespers* ’86 do feature accessible repetitions or refrains. However, the musical challenges and lexical orientation in *Vespers* ’23 resist some of the explicit concerns of the writing team, particularly from Rachel Joy, who spoke about including those with disabilities through accessible musical elements.

During my recent stay in June 2023, I became part of the *Bless This Night* history, “rolling out” the liturgy to the first summer cohort on Monday, 12 June. This was only the second full run-through in the Village (it had debuted just two weeks earlier), and the slightly nervous writing team offered a brief educational session beforehand to explain their artistic process and highlight key musical and textual elements. As worship commenced, I improvised a cello part, reading off the guitarist’s chord chart, which was heavily edited in pencil—evidence that it was still very much a “work in progress”—and witnessed an overwhelmingly enthusiastic response from the congregation.

I learned something important about Holden Village when I experienced a roomful of participants sight-reading this fairly challenging brand-new liturgy from a projector screen in full, exuberant voices. The community has a high degree of musical literacy, and enough strong music readers may carry the whole congregation through musical challenges with ease. This extended to the ad hoc ensemble I joined to accompany the liturgy, its eight movements thrown together on (less than) one rehearsal. Though we seemed like a hodge-podge, we were in fact a Luther College music education graduate (Laura, kitchen staff),

a music theory professor (Jeremy, two-week volunteer), his son, a high school senior and advanced violinist (Gabe, two-week volunteer), and me, a career church musician. Holden Village's unique musical environment, drawing many professional and trained musicians, may have had the impact of deceiving the writing team about the general accessibility of *Bless This Night*—but perhaps this musically challenging liturgy is, instead, well-suited to its context.

8. Conclusions

At Holden Village where, as a poster in the gift shop declares, “we sing more than we speak”, music and liturgy sit at the heart of daily community life. Liturgy shapes the community through dialogue and refinement, as well as forming the centers and peripheries of belonging. Evident in both Marty Haugen's writing process for *Vespers '86* and the collaborative writing team for *Vespers '23*, liturgical reforms prioritize responsive and intentional approaches to expansive language as well as a dialogic process that centers the residential community. Holden Village aspires to be a place of radical welcome for people and cohorts representing diverse and intersectional identities, consistent with its liberal Protestant faith tradition. Though significant efforts to diversify the faculty, staff, and guest constituencies at Holden Village have made an impact, the community remains overwhelmingly white, a reality reflected in both the writing team and musical language of the *Vespers '23* liturgy. Because Holden Village remains a site of pilgrimage for many Lutheran professionals and parishioners, what *happens* at Holden Village ripples throughout the denomination, defining the sound and shape of liturgical life in the ELCA. As the ELCA remains enmeshed in the challenges of disrupting overwhelming racial and ethnic homogeneity, as well as telegraphing moderate and progressive theological commitments such as LGBTQIA2S+ inclusion, liturgical music plays an essential role in defining the centers and peripheries of belonging.

While a review of recommendations for the Village and the ELCA denomination (and perhaps the broader field of mainline American Christianity) are outside the scope of this paper, this case study reveals the importance of interrogating worship resources and examining not only text, but also musical genre, style, performance practice, and the univocality typical of many canonized liturgical resources. One critical step resides in ensuring that diverse people hold active and ongoing leadership roles in the processes of liturgical writing, curation, and pedagogy. This work requires, at minimum, open communication, ongoing refinement and discernment, attention to identifying and disrupting inherited structures of power, and an iterative ethic of consent.

In this chapter of Holden Village's history, its leadership is well-equipped to model a multivocal and intercultural approach to Christianity, bringing together collaborators who can imagine a worship music framework that *resonates* a deep, layered sense of belonging for all who traverse the waterways and back roads into the mountains, looking to be transformed and renewed by God and community. Turning this task back to Holden Village, a place of prolific liturgical creativity and experimentation, I pray that *Vespers '23* marks the beginning of a new creative chapter, giving rise to many ways to (re)sound this transforming community.

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